

THE FUN OF WRITING

By
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WHO HAS JUST
DISCOVERED
THE
FUN
OF
WRITING

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THE FUN OF WRITING

I

DIARIES

HAVE you got a penknife? If so, do you get any fun out of using it? There's no fun in cutting one's finger, which is what happens to people who don't know how to use a knife. There's no fun in letting your knife get so blunt that it won't even sharpen a pencil. But there *is* fun in trying to carve a boat in the shape of a yacht, or an Atlantic liner, or in making a catapult. The more shapes you can carve, the more fun you get out of your knife.

It's the same with a pen. There's not much fun in just copying out other people's sentences. But there *is* fun in trying to give shape to your own thoughts, and they can be shaped in a thousand different ways. They

can be shaped into poetry which will make people share the excitement which you feel when you see a rainbow or smell a rose. There's the shape of a story, where you invent boys and girls and give them adventures, so that they become even more alive than the boys and girls you meet in real life. There's the shape of a play where you make them *act* their adventures. There are plenty of shapes, but they aren't all easy to make.

It's all very well for people to say, "Say what you have to say and stop," but pens are like horses. They run away with some people and refuse to budge with others. If your pen runs away with you you'll no more get a shape than you would if you let your knife run away with you and went on chipping until there was nothing left but wood filings. If your pen refuses to budge, your thoughts never get expressed at all, and again no shape comes. And the first duty of a pen is to give shape to your thoughts as a knife gives shape to a piece of wood. It is only by practising that you can make a horse or a penknife or a pen do what you want it to do.

I'd like you to get hold of as many different newspapers as you can and compare the various accounts or shapes of what the reporters have seen in yesterday's happenings. You will be surprised to find how different they are. Every reporter will be looking at the same thing, and every reporter will be trying his hardest to make the best possible shape. This is partly because no two people see the same thing in the same way or use their pens alike. No two people shape their letters in the same way, and no two people shape their thoughts in the same way.

And there's another thing. Nobody can possibly tell of everything he sees. He hasn't time, and there isn't room in the newspapers, and, anyway, he's bound to forget something. The first thing that the writer has to do is to choose what is most worth describing, and leave out the rest.

First, then, you have to find something worth writing about, and then you have to select what is most worth writing about it. Next, you have to decide who wants to read what you want to write. You have to think

of your audience. Your grandmother will want to know one thing and your young brother quite another.

You know how you want to run away from people who are for ever talking about their aches and pains, the badness of the weather, or what they have been eating for dinner. They talk like that because they haven't any other interests. They are the sort of people who keep their eyes fixed inside a bus or railway carriage instead of looking out of the window on the passing scene.

But how do you know that people don't start running away when they see *you* coming for exactly the same reason? It is by no means easy to see ourselves accurately, but it's a very useful practice and it helps us to see whether we have anything entertaining to give to other people. So before you try interesting other people, you've got to interest yourself. This shape of writing is called keeping a diary.

A diary is a letter that you write to yourself every day. Not the same length every day, of course. Monday with some people is a rotten day and Saturday a wildly thrilling

day. But every day has something worth saying about it unless you're deaf and dumb and blind to what's going on round you. But remember to keep this letter to yourself. Never show it to anybody. It's not a thing you are necessarily proud of. If it's going to be any good at all it's got to show you to yourself as you are, and I shouldn't be surprised if you get a bit of a shock. It's a looking-glass, not a flatterer, and in it you are going to see a reflection of your mind.

If you have nothing to write it will mean that your mind is empty, and it is time you started to fill it. If you have been mean or greedy or selfish or silly, say so, and you'll find that it looks twice as nasty on paper. The old eighteenth-century Doctor Rutty who wrote in his diary, "A little piggish in stuffing with vegetables" and "Ate like a swine to-day" probably became less greedy because he wrote that down. *Writing things down helps us to remember them.* That's one very good reason for keeping a diary.

Your diary is really the newspaper of your own little world. In it you make as accurate

a daily report as you can of all your wars, accidents, sports, work, friendships, spending and earning, and make criticisms of the books you read and the people you meet. Notice that word accurate. It is most important. A diary must be daily, it must be private, it must be honest, and it must be accurate.

Listen to this extract from the diary of Queen Victoria, written when she was thirteen. She kept a diary every day for seventy years, and it filled over a hundred volumes. She wrote this as she was driving from London to the North of England in a carriage over a hundred years ago :

Wednesday, August 1.

20 minutes to 9. We have just changed horses at Barnet.

5 minutes past half-past nine. We have just changed horses at St. Albans.

A quarter to 11. We have just changed horses at Dunstable.

12 minutes to 12. We have just changed horses at Brick Hill.

19 minutes to 1. We have just changed horses at Stony Stratford.

A quarter past 3. We have just changed horses at Daventry.

1 minute to 4. We have just changed horses at Dunchurch.

Now you may think that a very dull diary. But Queen Victoria's accuracy in noticing the exact time is interesting, for we now know the exact speed at which the Royal carriages used to travel, and the route they took along the muddy lanes of England a hundred years ago. It was probably too jolty to write anything as they drove, and when they stopped, probably all that she had time to write or remember was the name of the place and the exact time. Perhaps both her diary and her watch were new toys.

And, in any case, I don't call hers a dull diary. Here is the diary of a dull man :

Monday, 8 o'clock. Put on my clothes.

9 o'clock. Washed my hands.

10, 11, 12. Read the paper.

2 o'clock. Sat down to dinner. Too many plums and no suet.

3 to 4. Slept.

4 to 6. Walked in the fields. Wind, South-South-east.

6 to 10. At the Club.

10 o'clock. Bed.

Tuesday, 8 o'clock. Rose as usual.

9 o'clock. Washed hands and face.

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10, 11, 12. Walked to Islington.

1 o'clock. Drank a pot of beer.

2 to 3. Dinner on veal and bacon. Sprouts wanting.

3 o'clock. Slept.

4 to 6. Read newspaper.

6 to 10. At the Club.

10 o'clock. Bed.

Wednesday, 8 o'clock. Hands, but not face.

You see how his diary gives him away. I only hope that the writing of it made him see how dull he was.

To be any good at all a diary must be a complete record of all your life, not you in your best suit on your best behaviour, but you as you are. Samuel Pepys was the best diarist we ever had, because he didn't try to make himself out better than he was. When he loses his temper, he says so :

Angry with my wife for her things lying about, and in my passion kicked the little fine basket which I bought her in Holland and broke it, which troubled me after I had done it.

The very fact of writing that down must have helped him to remember not to be so silly again.

Here's another confession of bad temper from

a six- or seven-year-old girl called Marjorie Fleming :

I confess I have been very more like a little young devil than a creature, for when Isabella went upstairs to teach me religion and my multiplication and to be good, and all my other lessons, I stamped with my foot and threw my new hat which she had made on the ground, and was sulky and was dreadfully passionate, but she never whiped me but said, "Majorie, go into another room and think what a great crime you are committing, letting your temper git the better of you." But I went so sulkily that the Devil got the better of me. I am now going to tell you the horrible and wretched plague that my multiplication gives me. You can't conceive it. The most Devilish thing is 8 times 8 and 7 times 7. It is what Nature itself can't endure.

If you must let your temper get the better of you, a diary is much the best place to let it explode in, for it hurts nobody except yourself, and it does you good, for by the time you've written it all out you will have cooled down and seen how ridiculous you are.

A diary ought to be partly, but only partly, about yourself. Put down your own height and weight and confessions of bad temper by

all means. But don't forget to put down the tonnage of the *Queen Mary* and to record the bad temper of nations as well as your own.

I want you to take an interest in things happening as far away as Japan as well as in your own garden. Keep a record of the changing flowers, the coming and going of the birds, the ripening of the various fruits and the weather that follows changes in the wind. To note down things accurately which are directly under your nose is the first step to becoming a great scientist or a competent writer.

Watch a spider in his web and keep his diary for him for an hour or two ; try keeping the diary of a flock of sea-gulls or sparrows, or a horde of ants for an afternoon. Write your father's, mother's or school-teacher's diary for one day, and see if they are getting more fun out of life than you are.

Begin your diary to-night, before you go to bed, in a plain note-book with heaps of room in it, and write big things and little. And if you can fill in the writing with diagrams and sketches, so much the funnier, especially if you draw as badly as I do.

II

LETTERS

HOW about those diaries? How are they getting along? They're *not* getting along? I'm not altogether surprised. Doctor Johnson started no less than fourteen times to keep a diary, but just couldn't keep it up—and he probably wasn't as busy as some of you are. He saw that it was a good thing to do, but he couldn't do it. "You should write down everything that you remember," he said, "for you cannot judge at first what is good or bad ; and write immediately while the impression is fresh, for it will not be the same a week afterwards."

That's the pity of it. You and I both see such exciting, lovely things going on all round us, but everything happens so fast, and there are so many other things that we simply have to do, like dressing, and eating, and running

off to school, and lessons, and playing games, that there's simply no time left to write these things down until it's too late and the impression's gone.

The first time I went up in an aeroplane was awfully exciting. It was unlike anything else I had ever done, but I was too lazy to write down what I felt about it at the time. So I've forgotten all about that first sensation except that it was so unexpectedly pleasant that I find all other ways of travel very slow by comparison. I'd like to be always up in the air.

But you may say, "After all, it's a bit dull writing it all down in a book that no one is ever going to see. I'd like to tell other people what it feels like to fly for the first time." That's a very natural feeling. Suppose you see a horse run away as you are going home from school. You naturally want to tell people about it when you get home. It gives you a sense of superiority to have seen something that they've missed. And when your people aren't at home, but staying away, you want to tell them things just the same. So you write a letter.

Now quite a lot of people I know don't

write letters because they are afraid of being dull. So long as you write about things that genuinely interest you, you won't be dull. But it is just as well before you start writing even so simple a thing as a letter, to know exactly what a letter is. A diary is something that you write every day to yourself. A letter is something you want to say to someone who isn't there.

Your letters [wrote Lord Chesterfield to his son, who was a bad letter writer] are exceedingly laconic [I'll tell you what laconic means in a minute] and neither answer my desires, nor the purpose of letters, which should be *familiar conversations between absent friends*, particular accounts of yourself and your lesser transactions. When you write to me suppose yourself talking freely with me by the fireside. You would naturally mention the incidents of the day, as, where you had been, whom you had seen, what you thought of them. Tell me of any new persons and characters that you meet with in company and add your own observations upon them ; in short, let me see more of you in your letters.

That's what Lord Chesterfield said, and it couldn't have been better expressed. That's

exactly what a letter is meant to do—to let the person to whom you write see more of you. Letters can be about anything—your lesser transactions—daily doings, I'd call them ; they can be about nothing. Two things they must not be. They must not be laconic—that is, short, in the sense of being sulky, and they must not be dull. The subject of your letter need not be, as I said, anything in particular.

Suppose you're feeling rotten as the result of a bad cold. Well, why not describe that ? But don't describe it so badly as to make your friend feel as wretched as you are. Write like this, if you can. This is the way Charles Lamb described his bad cold. Listen :

Did you ever have a very bad cold ? This has been for many weeks my lot, and my excuse ! My fingers drag heavily over this paper, and to my thinking it is three and twenty furlongs from here to the end of this half-sheet.

I have not a thing to say ; nothing is of more importance than another. I am flatter than a pancake ; emptier than a judge's wig when the head is in it ; duller than a stage when the actors are off it ; I inhale suffocation ; I cannot distinguish veal from

mutton ; nothing interests me. If you told me the world will be at an end to-morrow, I should just say "Will it ?" I have not will enough to dot my i's, much less to comb my eyebrows. My hand writes, not I, from habit, as chickens run about a little when their heads are off. O for a vigorous fit of toothache—an earwig in my ear, a fly in my eye,—but this apathy, this death.

Now the first thing to notice about that letter is that it is not laconic. It is not short. It is not sulky. Exactly the opposite. It is good humoured, it is fresh, and it is quite long. And what is more important, it is entertaining. It states exactly what we all feel like when we have a bad cold, but it states it in a way that you probably never thought of. You see, it isn't enough to say "I have a bad cold and I feel rotten." If you're going to talk about your cold at all, you've got to make it sound amusing, as if having a cold was a great joke. In fact, you've got to remember that letter-writing is what is called an art.

You'd like to be an artist, wouldn't you ? I've always wanted to be one. But to be an artist means more than just splashing colours

about with a brush. You've got to select them and combine them in a particular way, and to be an artist with words means selecting and combining the best words to describe the particular thing you are trying to describe, and not just using the first words that come into your head, as you might in your diary.

Here is a hate-letter from Queen Elizabeth to Doctor Cox, a Bishop of Ely, who had obviously annoyed her :

PROUD PRELATE,—

You know what you were before I made you what you now are. If you do not immediately comply with my request, I will unfrock you, by God.

ELIZABETH.

I think Queen Elizabeth chose her words very well there, though this letter is certainly laconic. But a hate-letter should be short and to the point.

Here is a hate-letter from Sir Philip Sidney to his father's secretary, who had been prying into letters that were not his—a vile thing to do :

MR. MOLYNEUX,—

Few words are best. My letters to my

father have come to the eyes of some. Neither can I condemn any but you for it. If it be so, you have played the very knave with me, and so I will make you know if I have good proof of it. But that for so much as is past.

For what is to come, I assure you before God, that if ever I know you to do so much as read any letter that I write to my father without his commandment or my consent, I will thrust my dagger into you. And trust to it for I speak in earnest.

In the meantime, farewell.

Few words are certainly best in many kinds of letters. Here is one from a commercial traveller who had stayed away from work without leave, and wasn't sure whether he was going to get the sack or not :

DEAR FIRM, Am I still with you ?

“ Say what you have to say, and stop,” is the first rule of all good writing. So when people tell you that a business letter ought to begin like this :

With reference to your kind favour of the 13th ultimo, we have pleasure to inform you just don't believe them. That sounds more like frothing at the mouth than writing a

letter. Yet that is how business letters used to be written. But it is not how good business letters are written now or ever will be written again.

To-day when you want to sell or buy something, the best way is to say so politely and quickly. Beating about the bush only shows that you don't know the right way in. A good letter ought to be like a good dive—neatly in, no splash, soon out.

Suppose you are applying for a job by letter. Probably hundreds of other people are applying for it, too. How do you expect to be singled out? Only by having something that the others haven't got. You have all probably got more or less the same qualifications. What you don't share with any of the others is your own personality, and that is what you have somehow to convey on paper. It's rather like sending your photograph by television.

And you can't start too early trying to get that personality down on to paper. You can begin if you like by practising short, pithy, laconic hate-letters to people who pry over your shoulder, don't return things you lend

them, leave things lying untidily about, or don't turn up punctually—you may get rid of a lot of bad temper that way, and it's far better than sulking, any way, for you can tear them up when you've recovered your temper—but you will enjoy yourself far more if you begin by writing friendly letters, which are not short or laconic, but just yourself in friendly, what is called unbuttoned or expansive mood, giving the impression to your friend that there is nothing in the world you want to do so much as just go on talking on paper to her or him. This is how the best letters are written, by one person just lying back in an easy chair, folding his legs and settling down to a long talk with his best invisible friend.

It is only when you think that you are not being overheard or overlooked that you can really be yourself, and write letters as letters should be written. In a letter you are not acting before an audience. You are not making a public speech. You are not dressed up. You are more likely to be undressed. The best letters are written in bed. This may sound as if they were a lazy sort of writing. They

are not. Your friend has as much right to demand that you take trouble to entertain him as a public audience has. The difference is that with your friend you can be much more intimate. You can run from one topic to another, just as people do in conversation. As Lord Chesterfield said, "a letter is really only conversation, but it must be good conversation", not a vain repetition of "Well, I never", and "Oo-er, just fancy that now".

You can't afford the time to blather or froth at the mouth, either in speech or on paper. If you've got nothing to say, keep your mouth shut. But even if you think you've got nothing to write about, you'll be astonished how thoughts will begin to shape themselves if you begin to put pen to paper. You may write nonsense at first, but after all you can always tear up the first sheet and start again, and anyway, if you write of what interests you it's not likely to be nonsense.

We're back to where we started. What does interest you? Other people's faces? Well, why not describe them and at the same time draw them, so that other people may be

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able to recognise them? All letters are improved by occasional drawings, however rough. They're like maps to help the reader to find his way. And talking about finding your way don't you ever go for a walk? I don't mean the walk straight to and from school that you know so well, but a real walk, a fresh, adventurous, round-the-corner walk, where you may lose your way and flatten your nose against the windows of strange shops and see a lot of unfamiliar names over the shop-windows? Charles Dickens used to write stories round the funny names of people he saw printed above the shop windows. There's enough material for twenty letters in a single walk from school if you go just a yard or two out of the way you usually take and keep your eyes open.

* * * * *

What do you do on Saturdays? Don't you ever go fishing for tiddlers, or visit museums, or watch a football match? You've got plenty of material for any number of good letters in your life. Perhaps the trouble is that you have no one to write to. Your father and mother, sisters, cousins, and friends all live near you,

and you know nobody who would like to hear from you. You are wrong. You know me. And I should like to hear from you. I'm not much of a letter-writer myself—nobody ever seems to be able to read my writing—but I just love getting letters—the postman's knock is the best noise I hear in the day—so if you want to practise letter-writing sit down and write to me.

And what do I want you to write about? I want you to write about yourself, tell me about the books you read and why you like them or dislike them, tell me about the films you see and why you like them or dislike them, the wireless—what you like and what you dislike about that. Describe your school, your home, your town or village, your games, your work, your lesser transactions, your daily doings—any blessed thing about yourself that you like. Don't be afraid to use the word "I"—it's your "I" that I want to hear about. Talk to me on paper as if I were really there wearing the cloak that makes me invisible. It's easier than actual talking because there's none of that shyness that makes us fidget from one leg to the other and say silly things that

we don't mean to when we meet in the flesh. On paper we can afford to be our natural selves. Just as I can talk to you more easily because I can't see you, so you can write to me more easily because you can't see me.

It's great fun writing to invisible friends. You can try out your jokes without the fear that you'll be laughed at instead of with. You can be serious or merry, angry or friendly, according to your mood, and there's no one to tell you to shut up talking because you're being a nuisance, because this silent talking on paper can't ever be a nuisance to anybody.

And as well as writing your own letters there's lots of fun to be had out of writing other people's letters for them.

Write a letter from a flea to an elephant on the advantages of being small ; and write the elephant's reply.

Write a letter from any dog you know to any cat you know, telling him exactly what he thinks about him, and give the cat's reply.

Write a letter from a conceited motor horn to a saxophone proving how much more useful his voice is to society than the other fellow's.

Write a letter from a policeman newly

appointed to your neighbourhood describing to an old friend what he thinks of the place and the people in it, particularly you.

Write a letter from a window-cleaner to an engine-driver suggesting that they swap jobs.

Write a letter from a horse-chestnut to an eating chestnut, and from a toadstool to a mushroom—you can guess what about.

Write a letter of welcome from the oldest house in your town or village to the newest.

Write a letter from a bald man to a long-haired poet on the advantages of getting his hair cut.

This is a good way to get inside the skins of people and things different from yourself, and living about twenty lives instead of one. Let your imagination rip. Write letters from the stars to a submarine, and from the North Pole to the Equator. And don't be afraid of expressing your likes and dislikes. If there are things you fear—passing cows in a field, codliver oil, or spiders—describe your experiences with them and you'll find that they aren't nearly as bad when you put them down on paper. If there are things you hate—sarcasm, meanness, bullying, saying things behind people's backs, writing spiteful things

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and not daring to sign your own name to them—describe your experience of those things too, and it may help put a stop to them, especially in yourself.

But most of all, when you like things, don't be afraid of telling your friends on paper. You'll find sometimes that the sight of a whole lot of stars on a dark night will make you feel all queer, and a squiggly feeling will run down your spine as you see a kingfisher or a green woodpecker or a goldfinch.

Try and describe in your letters all the lovely sights and sounds and smells that you come across in your life, so that your friends may share the fun you get out of being alive!

* * * * *

That's the true purpose of letters, to increase other people's fun and happiness, by increasing your own. So don't wait as you did with those diaries, but sit down now and start talking to me on paper. Not about the weather.

“2.49. It's as hot as it was in June in Manchester.” Not that. I know that; I'm in Manchester. Something else, much more interesting. Yourself. Let me see more of you.

III

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BEFORE we get on to anything else a word or two more about letters.

The most interesting letters that I get are the longest and the neatest, and nearly always written on foolscap instead of notepaper, leaving plenty of margin.

Foolscap gives you plenty of room. Ordinary notepaper makes you feel as cramped as a bull in a china shop, but foolscap makes you feel free to roam about like a bull on a moor. You must not feel shut in, either in space or time. Give your words plenty of breathing-space. Letters should be written in driblets. Take a week over one letter, doing a bit here and a bit there, as you weed a garden.

And, above all, loosen up, relax, unbutton. Collars may be all the better for being stiff and

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starchy, and staid, and buttoned up tight. But letters are not like collars. They're more like hammocks—loose, lazy, comfortable, homely things.

This is what I call a letter : it's from Sutton Coldfield :

I don't like all kinds of fish. There are only two kinds which I do like, and they are filleted lemon sole and sardines. You will never guess what turned me off fish. Well, one afternoon I was going along Upper Holland Row, and I saw a dead cat lying in the road with a fish-bone sticking out of its mouth. It had evidently choked, and since then I have never eaten much fish.

Whatever else that letter is, it is neither stiff nor starchy.

Here's an extract from a letter from a farmer's daughter near Rotherham :

We are also well protected against mice, only having 12 cats. It is amusing to watch them seated round the cows at milking-time.

Keeping the mice from attacking the cows, I suppose.

Now the change from letter-writing to writing

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an autobiography is very slight. The only difficult thing about autobiography is its silly long name. Graphy is a Greek word, meaning writing. Geography means writing about maps. Biography means writing about chaps. Autobiography means writing about the chap that you ought to know best—yourself.

You may very well say that you've been doing this all along. That's quite true. In your diary you've been writing about yourself, in your letters you write about yourself, and now in your autobiography I'm asking you to go on writing about yourself. You'll be telling me soon that you are getting fed up with the sight of yourself. So you would be if you were dull or stupid. But you needn't be either dull or stupid. I think you're worth an autobiography. So let's get on to it.

In your diary you write about yourself to yourself, an absolutely private sort of writing. In your letters you write about yourself to me, just to one other person, a fairly private sort of writing, conversation on paper. In your autobiography you write about yourself to the world. It's your first appearance in public.

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You have to watch your step. You are no longer making conversation. You are making a record, and exactly as if you were making a gramophone record, you've got to be clear and certain of what you're going to say beforehand. You can't afford to make mistakes. It's expensive work making new records.

You can no longer write down things just as they come into your head. You have to start arranging things in the proper order. You have to learn to select. You may not have lived a very long time, but if you wrote down everything that has happened to you, and everything that has been said to you since you were born, you'd never get your autobiography written, and no one would want to read it if you did.

So before you start your autobiography you must make notes about it, construct a sort of scaffolding on which to build it. You have to build it room by room, chapter by chapter. This is where you will find your diary useful, for it will help you to remember exciting things that happened to you which you would otherwise have forgotten. Your diary will jog your

memory exactly as old photographs do. Smells are useful memory-joggers. The smell of roast chestnuts may remind you of other foggy November days, just as the smell of new-mown hay may remind you of a specially good summer holiday.

Only when the scaffolding is up and the notes arranged in their right order can you start. The important thing to remember about starts, whether in a race or a book, is to get quickly off the mark. And you are just as likely to have one or two false starts in a book as in a race. It's a good thing not to be satisfied. Try several starts.

George Borrow, a glorious fellow who used to roam the country with the gipsies, began his autobiography, which he called *Lavengro*, like this :

On the 5th day of July, 1803, at East Dereham, a beautiful little town in the western division of Norfolk, I first saw the light.

He was obviously dissatisfied with that, because he crossed it out and started again like this :

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On an evening in July, in the year 1803, at East Dereham, a beautiful little town in a certain district of East Anglia, I first saw the light.

I don't think much of either of these starts. I wish he had had a third "go", because "I first saw the light" is simply a roundabout way of saying, "I was born", and he ought to have been more precise about the date and place.

Mr. H. G. Wells begins his autobiography like this :

This brain of mine came into existence in a needy shabby home in a little town called Bromley in Kent. It was one of a row of badly built houses upon a narrow section of the High Street. In front upon the ground floor was the shop, filled with crockery, china and glassware and cricket bats, balls, stumps, nets and other cricket material.

In the scullery was a small fireplace, a copper boiler for washing, and provision cupboard, a bread-pan, a beer cask, a pump delivering water from a well into a stone sink, a space for coal, our only space for coal, beneath the wooden stairs.

That's a much better start. The only thing

wrong with it is "this brain of mine", which sounds as if the rest of his body was born earlier or later. He might just as well have said "this stomach of mine". He should have said, "I was born in a needy, shabby home". It's a good idea to begin with surroundings. Don't think it's necessary to be either famous or old to write a good autobiography.

Here's a good one by someone who was neither old nor famous. It's Trelawny's *Adventures of a Younger Son*.

I was an unusually boring awkward boy.

One day I was perched on an apple tree, throwing apples down to my brother when my father came on us suddenly. Every trifle put him in a passion. Commanding us to follow him, he led us towards the town, and through the streets, without uttering a syllable, a distance of four miles. Arriving at the end of the town my father stalked to a walled and dreary building. We followed up a long passage ; he rung at a prison-looking entrance-gate ; crossing a dark hall we entered a small parlour. In ten minutes entered a dapper little man, carrying his head high in the air, with large bright silver buckles on his shoes, a stock buttoned tightly round his neck, spectacled and powdered.

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With repeated bows to my father he requested him to take a chair.

“Sir,” said my father, “will you undertake the charge of these ungovernable vagabonds? I can do nothing with them. This fellow” (pointing at me) “will come to the gallows if you do not scourge the devil out of him.”

With this my father got up, bowed, and without taking any notice of us, went out of the room.

Well, that’s enough of beginnings. Without any shilly-shallying you let your audience know who you are, where you were born, the sort of place it was, what your parents were like, and, if you know, what sort of a person you are.

The circle quickly widens. You go to fresh places. Describe those. You meet fresh people. Describe those. And without knowing it, from the way in which you describe your brothers and sisters, friends and teachers, you will be gradually describing yourself. So don’t try to make yourself out to be either better or worse than you are, or you’ll make a false book. Your object is not to make people like or hate you, but to see you as you are.

Your object is not to invent a wildly exciting story, full of earthquakes and shipwrecks, that's another sort of writing, but to prove that your actual life is interesting in spite of the fact that you aren't a buccaneer or a cow-puncher. You'll really be surprised to find, once you have made a start—if you have made a proper start—how easily your pen runs on, and how it all comes back to you.

There's some magic about a pen that makes it act as a memory-jogger, so long as you insist on it going on, not resting for an hour at every full stop. By which I do not mean that you've got to get the story done at a sitting. I don't want you to hurry it. You can spend a whole day describing the clothes that your father or mother wear if you like. You haven't got to get it finished by any particular time. It's not a jumper for Christmas.

If you like to send me chapters to read as you go along, do ; but don't forget now that you are writing not only for me to see, but all the world, so your writing will have to be a good deal neater, and your spelling a good deal more accurate than they are in your letters. You're

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not in undress any longer. You don't write your autobiography in bed. You have to sit up to it. You are in the workshop now, creating something of public importance.

If you don't find it going as well as you expect, give it a rest, and try writing the autobiography of other people and other things. Pretend that you are ten years older—the world will have changed a lot by then—and write your autobiography then. Pretend that you are just born, and give your first impressions of this strange world. Pretend that you have become a famous airman.

Dream a little and imagine a lot. Suppose that a witch has come along and transformed you, first into a drop of rain, then into a magpie, then into the Emperor of China, then into a piece of coal, then into the Lord Mayor of London, then into Father Christmas, and finally into an air-wave. Write your life-story as each of these things in the first person.

Try to think yourself right into the skins of other people and animals, and then write their life-stories, as they would write them them-

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selves. Write your cat's, your dog's, your rabbit's day-to-day life from its own point of view. We are always talking about walls having ears. Suppose them to have eyes, too, and feelings. So write the autobiography of a railway station waiting-room, or your church steeple. Go right off the earth and write the life-story of the sun as it would write it itself.

But whether you write your own story or someone else's for them, do be simple. You can begin "I was born" if you like, though surely you can think of something brighter than that, but for goodness' sake don't start by saying "I first saw the light".

IV

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WE'VE now got to biography, that is writing the life of someone else, not yourself. Up to now in your diaries and letters and autobiographies you have been looking in at yourself. Now I want you to look out on other people. And these people can be either alive or dead. You're pretty well bound to have a hero or a villain amongst people who lived long ago. You may love Joan of Arc or Bonnie Prince Charlie, you may hate Henry VIII or Cromwell, and you may disagree with what the history books say about them. Why not rewrite their lives for yourself?

It means, of course, going to the library and reading all the books about them that you can lay your hands on, and it means trying to get pictures of them and seeing

what they looked like, getting hold of their diaries and letters and seeing what they thought about people and things, and it means making a list of the things they did, both good and bad, and then after sifting and arranging all the material, trying to draw a fresh portrait of them as they appear to you.

Now that, I think, is very good fun indeed, because you can never be quite certain that you've got the character right.

You've probably seen Henry VIII on the films, or Queen Christina or Catherine the Great or the Barretts of Wimpole Street. Biographies are very popular on the films and it's a jolly good way of seeing how famous people lived, but you've probably asked yourself while watching these films, "How do I know that they've got this character right? Did Henry VIII really make such a mess of his face while eating? Was Elizabeth Barrett's father really such a bully?"

So go off in search of evidence and write your version of their lives. And don't forget that it's got to read as if it were about a live, interesting person, for though Henry VIII

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has been dead a long time, he was alive once, though you might not think so from the dull way some historians write about him.

You can't altogether tell what a person is like from the laws he leaves behind him or the battles he fought in. You've got to know how and what he ate, how he dressed, how he behaved to other people, how other people behaved to him ; the little things as well as the big. And don't try to make him look better than he is, or you'll make the mistake that some photographers make of leaving out the lines in a forehead so that you can't recognise the photograph as a likeness at all. In a law court one lawyer tries to paint the accused man as black as possible, and hides all the good about him, and the other lawyer hides all the bad and tries to convince the jury that he is blameless.

But a biography is not a trial by jury. It should be an accurate picture. If Cromwell has a wart on his forehead, say so. Julius Cæsar was a great leader, but Shakespeare makes us see his failings and his superstitions as well as his good qualities.

Many of Shakespeare's plays are just acted biographies. In fact, I know Richard II and Henry V far better as the result of seeing them on the stage than I do from reading about them in history books.

So select some favourite hero or heroine in the past—Charlotte Brontë, say, and spend as long as ever you like collecting every scrap of information you can about her, sift it, arrange it, and try to re-create her, make her live again as vividly as anyone you know in real life, because a biography is no good unless it is flesh and blood.

But perhaps you'd rather write about someone living. Perhaps your favourite hero or heroine is still very much alive. Perhaps you'd like to write the life of Charles Laughton, or Clark Gable, or Sir Malcolm Campbell. Well, why not? You'll find their photographs everywhere. The newspapers are always telling us about them. They are always on the films or broadcasting.

It's easier to find out about them and to understand them than it is to understand Charlotte Brontë once you can hear them on

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the wireless and both see and hear them on the pictures. And your biography of them can go on. Find out as much as you can about their childhood, for you'll be surprised to find how tremendously most people are influenced by the way they spent their childhood, and what happened to them when they were your age.

And why not write the biography of someone even closer to you than Clark Gable or Gracie Fields? Why not write the life of one of your own family? After all, you ought to know your father or mother fairly well, and though they may not lead the exciting sort of life that Henry VIII or Harold Lloyd led or leads, there must be a lot of interesting things to find out about them.

You might begin by describing your grandparents and get them to tell you what your father and mother were like when they were little, and if possible get them to tell you stories about them. A good biography is full of good stories. Then describe the houses they lived in, because homes make a great difference. Anyone would rather be brought up on

a farm with lots of ducks and hens and pigs than in a room in a crowded street where there are no animals or trees or fields.

And as well as collecting information about their past, make notes about their present—what puts them in a good mood, what makes their tempers bad, what they do in their spare time ; make records sometimes of their actual conversations ; give a diary of their daily doings ; make lists of their likes and dislikes, and any old habits they have, and try to see how they change from year to year.

And as a change from your parents, why not write the biography of your eight-year-old sister, giving in the first part all that you can remember of her earlier life, and then go on to describe what you think the rest of her life will be when she grows up, and what to your mind she is likely to grow into ?

There is great fun in writing imaginary biographies—the biography of your own great-grandson—the sort of life that you think people will be leading in the year A.D. 2000.

Why not try writing the imaginary life-story

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of an animal, a story like *The Story of a Red Deer*, or *Tarka the Otter*, or *Owd Bob*, or, best of all, *The Wind in the Willows*, where you get the life of a toad, a mole, a rat and a badger all in one story. But whether it's real or imaginary you've got to make it sound as if it were real, so your first rule is to observe as carefully as any detective and to take a tremendous lot of notes.

By far the best biography ever written was that of Dr. Johnson, who lived in the eighteenth century and had his life written by James Boswell, and the reason that it is the best is that Boswell never stopped taking notes. Nothing was too trivial for him to record. He shadowed Johnson wherever he went, watching him like a sleuth-hound, taking down pretty well everything that he said, and the result is that he was able to build up a more complete picture of a man than any other biographer has.

And I now propose to tell you what were the things about Doctor Johnson that Boswell tells us, so that you may know what are the thousand and one things that go to make a

good biography. Well, here's Doctor Johnson as Boswell saw him :

He was almost blind in one eye, and as he didn't like this to be noticed in church he used to go into the fields and read there. Even worse than this were frequent black moods of dejection which made him surly, irritable and languid. There were times when he could not even tell the time by the town clock. To try to cure himself he would walk from his home in Lichfield to Birmingham and back again, but it didn't make him any better.

Somebody paid for him to go to Oxford, but there wasn't enough money for him to stay there the full time. Some friendly undergraduates, seeing that his toes were peering out through his worn-out shoes, put a new pair outside his door, but he was too proud to accept them and threw them away. His father, who was a bookseller, was a failure and left the boy penniless. So he became a schoolmaster, but hated teaching so much that he had to give it up after a few months. He then, at the age of twenty-six, fell in love with a widow nearly twice his age who had

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enough money to enable him to start a school of his own, but that was a failure because he only got three pupils. But one of them, David Garrick, became the most famous actor of his time.

His pupils used to peep through the keyhole to make fun of the love-making of the fat, almost blind, ungainly schoolmaster and his fat, affected, painted wife.

After the failure of his school, Johnson went to try his fortune in London by writing, arrived with a play that he had written, but no money. He was paid ten guineas for a poem, and wrote for magazines, but the book that brought him public recognition was curiously enough a biography—the life-story of a friend with whom he had spent nights wandering through the streets because they had no money for a lodging. The book that you probably know him by, if you know anything about him at all, is his *Dictionary*, which took him eight years to complete. He had six men to help him write it.

When his wife died he took into his house a negro, a blind woman, and several other

people who couldn't look after themselves. He would slip pennies into the hands of children sleeping on the doorsteps, and once, when he was asked why he always gave money to beggars, he replied : " Why, Madam, to enable them to beg on." He was generous, even to the extent of buying oysters for his cat.

But he was gruff and insolent-tempered. Once in a theatre a man took his seat when he left it for a minute and refused to give it up, so Johnson picked up the man and the chair and threw them both into the pit. He had an amazing energy. He rode fifty miles in a single day on horseback after hounds, bathed in the sea at Brighton in October when he was sixty, ran a race in the rain in Paris when he was sixty-four, took the knife out of the doctor's hands when he was being operated on before his death and helped to cut himself open.

In his dress Johnson was very slovenly, and wore a rusty-brown morning suit, old unbuckled shoes, and a little shrivelled-up unpowdered wig, sticking on top of his head, with the sleeves of his shirt and the knees

of his breeches and his black worsted stockings all hanging loose. His waistcoats were always spotted with grease and stains of tea and food.

He talked a broad Staffordshire dialect. When the punch-bowl was poured out he would call out, "Who's for poonsh?" He used to say "tear" for there, and "woonse" for once.

As he walked he rolled his head and body, and to calm himself down after being annoyed he used to waggle his feet up and down like a small boy.

He ate with such savage haste that the veins used to stand out and beads of sweat poured down his face. He was for ever drinking tea and repeating bits of the Lord's Prayer aloud to himself. Whenever he went in or out of a door or passage he was always careful that either his left or right foot (Boswell forgot which) should make the first actual movement when he came to it. If he did not get it right he would go back and do it again. He touched every lamp-post that he passed. He made all sorts of queer noises with his mouth, sometimes half whistling, sometimes clucking like a hen, and sometimes repeating

"too-too-too-too" like a crooner on the radio. Then he would blow out his breath like a whale.

You can understand how exciting it must have been to write the biography of so eccentrically behaved a man as this, but his odd behaviour was only one side of him. His wife said, after first hearing him talk, "This is the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life," and it is the common-sense of Dr. Johnson's talk that makes him so great a character. Here is a specimen of his conversation :

My dear friend, clear your mind of cant. You may talk as other people do : you may say to a man, "Sir, I am your humble servant!" You are not his most humble servant. You may say, "These are bad times : it is a melancholy thing to be reserved to such times!" You don't mind the times. You tell a man, "I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey and were so much wet!" You don't care sixpence whether he's wet or dry. You may *talk* in this manner ; it is a mode of talking in society ; but don't *think* foolishly.

Well, doesn't all that make you feel as if

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you really have known Dr. Johnson, and doesn't it make you feel that he was really worth knowing? So you can take Boswell for your model and imitate his way, but as well as having his patience you must find someone worth exercising your patience on.

People seem to be interesting in proportion as they are a little eccentric, so you don't want to write about someone who behaves as everybody else behaves, but someone who thinks for himself, and acts for himself. You've got to think of your biography as if it were a play or film (Dr. Johnson's life would make a grand film) and make it dramatic and funny and humorous. You know how dull the lists of kings are—just a string of dates. Well, don't let your biography be like that. You know how exciting the lives of Mary Queen of Scots and Captain Bligh of the "Bounty" are on the films.

Aim at being as interesting as that and you'll find people sitting up all night to read what you've written.

Here's a good example of a biography. It is the life of her mother by a small girl :

Lilian was born in a particularly small house in the town of Leytonstone . . . She was the middle child of the family, and so from childhood she was servant to her elder brothers and sisters, and nurse-maid to the young ones. "Lilly," as her family called her, grew up to be unselfish and helpful, and she was loved and respected at school. She was so occupied with her duty at home that she did not have any time to read or study during her home life and, therefore, was rather backward in her work.

After leaving school Lilian is apprenticed to a dressmaker. Later she becomes a nurse-maid in a rich family. She marries. After the birth of the author of this biography the husband loses his money, and the family has to move from a large house to a small flat.

Although it was so unlucky for her husband to lose his money and lovely home, Lilian did not pine or grumble at their change of luck, but settled down to make the best home she could, and by the time her husband had saved a little store of money the whole family could honestly say they loved the flat. . . .

My mother's life has always been one of

sacrifice and unselfishness, and her whole day is spent in help for others, and no one has ever heard her grumble. So ends this period of her life of love.

And here is a thirteen-year-old's biography of her father :

Using my memory, I see a well-built, stout man of about fifty years. He is well dressed in a tailor-made tweed suit. My father was always very well dressed when not working. He was also very thorough in his ways, and brought his family up the same. His hair would be well brushed and neat ; his moustache well trimmed, and the hard-worked hands tidy, clean and well kept when office work had to be done. . . .

All this knowledge I received from my mother, but I have a little knowledge of him myself. I remember him best by his habits, which were many. After coming down in the morning he would hurry into the back garden or yard to see if the weather were good or bad. He would always come in and say, "What a grand morning this morning, just a little chilly," or he would say, "A lovely morning, ever so warm in the sun." Over breakfast he would tell jokes he had heard while at work, making us all laugh, and starting the day well. . . .

Father had rather a kind heart, for he slipped many a copper into a blind man's hat, but would not let anyone think he had done so. . . . If anyone found out and jested about it, he would try to put them off, saying that it was not he who had money to give away, or "We have to keep the Mint working."

Brothers and sisters are sometimes the cause of plain speaking ; here is a picture of a sister :

. . . on the whole, she is rather a pleasant girl. . . . Her chief recreations are tennis and dancing, though every dance she goes to she wants a new frock—for she says she has none to put on. Candidly speaking, I think she has enough to sink a ship. . . . Her temper sometimes gets the better of her, but she is always a good sister to me.

I think the final words absolve the writer from any suspicion of cattiness.

Here is the biography of a tinker.

Ebernezer Tidnes, a captain's batman during the War, finds himself unemployed when discharged from the army. He starts as a travelling tinker :

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The day he started was a beautiful day in September. It was a joy to be working that morning, but he did not think what it would be like in the winter. He started the day very well. Nearly every house he went to a lady gave him a knife or a pair of scissors to sharpen. . . .

One day he set out, but he felt very tired, and when he went to bed (which was in a field) he took a long time to go to sleep. Eventually he did go to sleep, but he didn't know that some gipsies had watched him. They very cautiously came up to him. They could see that he was not well, so they picked him up and carried him to their caravan. They could see that he was unconscious, so they laid him down, and after a few hours he woke up. . . .

He was rather frightened at first, because he had always thought that gipsies were rough and nasty people ; but to his amazement he found they were very nice people, and were willing to do anything for him. They told him that he was ill and mustn't get up for a week or two. . . .

A gipsy came forward and said that her daughter would do his work until he was quite well again. When Ebernezer was better he went back to his work, but the gipsy girl was very upset because she had to leave the work, so Ebernezer said that if

she liked she could work with him. So that is what happened. . . .

After about a month Ebernezer and the gipsy girl were very fond of each other, and after a long time decided to get married. So this is what they did. They were very happy together, and to this day they still go round sharpening people's knives and scissors.

Here is an extract from a fine character study of a farm labourer :

George Forster was about sixty when he first met my eyes. He was about five feet six inches when he stood upright. He was bent nearly double, had a straggling moustache, and wore an old coat, a battered bowler hat and an old jacket. A pair of old corduroy trousers were George's next article of attire, and George was complete. . . .

One day John Woodward [a farmer] and George went up the stack of bales for some bales. Albert Woodward and Mr. W. protested strongly, but George said, "I'll be all right, Mr. Woodward, thank ye kindly." Mr. Woodward thought differently though.

George and John climbed up the ladder and got a bale each. "Mind, George," said John, "you're holding the bale awkwardly." "Oh, I'm all right, John," re-

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sponded George gaily, and started for the ladder. George got to the ladder all right, but slipped on a loose bale. John ran to the ladder, but too late. George went hurtling down, head over heels, and landed with a bounce, and a gasp something like "Ahhhhh!" broke from his lips as all the breath was knocked out of his body.

George picked himself up. "Are you all right, George?" came a voice from one corner of the barn. "I'll be all right in a minute, Albert," replied George, still a little out of breath. Now that George had recovered himself sufficiently to speak we went up to him. "Albert, you know," began George, "it's a mortal long way for an old man to fall." Here George gave the bales a kick, and Albert jumped hastily back at the sudden display of agility. "It is that," Albert ventured. "Go in the stable and sit down."

George did so. In about another half-hour he came out and said, "I'm all ready for work now, Albert."

And here's a paragraph from a life of a horse :

... He was as contented and happy as any young colt could be. His only companion was his mother, who had carefully

nursed him during the first months after he was born, and who would play with him until sleep overcame them both. A babbling brook flowed down from the hills and rippled merrily across one side of the field where he lived, and big shady trees spread over the plentiful grass, crowning it with splendour.

What more could that gay animal want ? He knew no other pleasures and could not therefore covet any. It was a fine steed, and one could not help admiring his grace and beauty. His soft, black, glossy coat glistened like glazed ivory, forming a formidable foreground to the peaceful setting of that landscape.

Well, all those six fragments of biography were written by boys and girls under thirteen years old. So it can't be very difficult, can it ?

V

TRAVEL

AND now at last we can give people a rest and pass on to write about places. I imagine that at some time in your life you've felt like running away to sea or wanted to join the gipsies. I often have. I still do. I wish I had.

All my life I've wanted to travel. I always like seeing strange faces and new scenery. I love adventures. I'd like to spend the rest of my life dashing about in aeroplanes and steamers and small boats, crossing Russia by train, going up the Amazon in a canoe, and crossing the Andes by air. But all this sort of travel is expensive, and by the time we've earned enough money to go anywhere, most of us don't any longer know how to enjoy travel or much want to go.

To be a good traveller you've got to culti-

vate the kind of mind that misses nothing, and to keep the same sort of wild excitement going that you had when you first saw the sea. And you've got to be something of a vagabond, too ; possess something of the spirit of the Americans who always find all the world full of fascination. To be profitable, travelling ought to be adventurous. One of the most interesting sights to me while I was in the United States was the hitch-hiker—the lonely man and lonely girl I would see on the prairie signalling to the passing motorist to give them a lift a stage further on their journey to nowhere in particular. Another popular way of getting free rides in America is to jump the freight trains. I bet you've never felt like boarding a goods-train in England. At sea there's always the stowaway method.

It's a queer thing but true that the more money people pay to travel the less fun they seem to get out of it. So the real reason why we don't travel more isn't that we haven't the money, but that we're lazy. We've lost the adventurous spirit of the first explorers. If at this moment somebody came into the room and

offered to take you as cabin-boy to explore some lost island in the Pacific, would you get up and go? I would. And I hope you would. But I very much doubt it.

We don't any longer go dashing off into uncharted seas as people used to when Columbus set out for the Indies and Drake sailed round the world. We're much more careful of our skins than our ancestors used to be, and that makes us worse travellers, for the true traveller takes his life in his hands and doesn't worry overmuch whether he's going to get through alive. Nor does he worry about comfort. He'd rather live a gipsy life than a life of luxury.

That is why I like reading books of travel more than most other books. Their authors are nearly always braver than the writers of other sorts of books. The sort of people I most admire are these fellows who, like Smythe, try to climb Everest, like Courtauld, cross Greenland, or like Captain Scott, go out in search of the South Pole.

It is a good thing to learn to endure hardships, and to risk one's life.

And you can't begin too soon to learn how to travel. You must first cultivate the desire to travel. This is done partly by getting a love of maps. It was a love of maps that set Joseph Conrad, perhaps the best writer of sea-stories who ever lived, off into the blue, in spite of the fact that as a Pole he never as a boy saw the sea.

"It was in 1868," he said, "when I was nine years old, that while looking at a map of Africa and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself, 'When I grow up I shall go there.' "

One of the earliest and best writers of travels was Richard Hakluyt, and he was started off in the same way by a love of maps when he was a boy at Westminster. From studying maps he went on to that verse in the Psalms where he read that they which go down to the sea in ships see the works of the Lord, His wonders in the deep. And these "things of high and rare delight", as he describes them, made in him so deep an impression that he determined when he grew up to be a writer of travels.

Make up your mind to become a good map-reader and a good map-maker at once. As a matter of fact it is owing to the schools that we are getting these new brilliantly coloured utilisation maps with their splodges of green for woods, grey for fields, brown for arable, yellow for heaths and commons, purple for gardens, and brick-red for buildings. These maps make walking a new kind of game for me, by which I score points if I can keep all day on the green and yellow, and lose points if I have to touch the purple patches or the red.

I find maps very exciting things, because I always think that I'm reading them right when I'm going hopelessly wrong. I get more easily lost with a map than without one, even after years of practice. But their colours always fascinate me, and I shall go on building up an idea of what the country ought to look like from the map, in spite of the fact that it never looks in the least as I expected it to even from the utilisation maps.

Sometimes I think that places are just as unexpected as people are. Why should some places make us frightened or depressed, and

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other places make us want to sing? I always want to sing and dance when I am on the top of a hill, and I usually do, whereas after walking for an hour or two through dense woods I usually pine to get out into the sunlight. I am always happy in the sunlight.

But at the same time as you are learning to make a map you must learn to take notes. Almost everything that happens is of importance in taking notes on travel. Begin by taking notes on the direction of the wind and the weather, and see if there is any relation between the two. Then note how different the same path becomes at different seasons of the year, how frequented or how lonely at different hours of the same day. Make notes on all the different types of people you pass. Even if you have taken the same way to and from school every day for years you'll be surprised to find how much you've missed if you begin to take notes.

But I don't want you to take the same way home every day. I want you to do exactly the opposite. Even if it takes a little longer I want you to find a different way every day, to get

into the habit of exploring, getting to know all there is to be known about the by-ways as well as the highways of your village or town. You don't need to go as far afield as Africa to find adventure, or to get the thrill of travel. There's a lot of strange fun lying in wait for you within half a mile of your front door, but most people are too blind to see it.

You'll never see much if you go in gangs ; you'll be too busy chattering. Go alone or with one companion whom you can rely on to keep quiet and to see things that you miss.

It's best to go alone because then you'll see the animals, foxes and stags, that are shy of human beings, and it's best to go alone because you'll go more slowly, and stop oftener to listen to birds singing, to watch fish in a stream, or to smell the wild flowers in the hedges. You don't have to set your pace to suit somebody else. You can concentrate on the job in hand, which is to travel, to enjoy travelling, and to fill your mind with beauty.

And I should like to think that you not only travel by day, but by night. Most people miss quite half the fun of life by not sleeping out of

doors on haystacks, in barges, in tents, or hammocks slung under trees.

You only begin to live when you get into the habit of camping out. No food ever tastes so good, no sleep is half so sweet ; your eyes and ears and all your senses become ten times more alert than they ever do under a roof ; you learn to be dependent no longer on anyone else for anything. You even work for yourself. Under the night stars you come into direct touch with a beauty you never even dream about in a house, and can you think of anything finer in life than running down through the dewy grass in the early morning to bathe in the river before anybody else is out of bed ?

If I had my way I should be a tramp all my days, for I have always been most completely happy when I have been on the tramp.

The trouble is that it is so enjoyable that you don't feel like sitting down and describing it. In the first place, you feel that you don't want to waste precious time that would be better spent in looking about, in writing down what you have already seen. In the second place, you feel too lazy, if not too sleepy. It's an

awful business trying to write articles in a tent or on holiday.

And yet it's worth doing, much in the same way that it's worth taking photographs.

We want some memento of our travels. Pleasures fade so quickly from the mind. Besides, not being dogs in a manger, and having enjoyed ourselves so much, we ought to want to share our enjoyment with other people, and get them to go out tramping in their turn. We should never realise the fun there is to be got out of travelling if it wasn't for the tales that the travellers bring back. It was a chance reading of Bates' *Naturalist on the Amazons* that sent Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, who is one of our best travel writers, off up the Amazon. This is what he says about it :

One bitter and northerly Easter I read, because gardening was impossible, Bates' *Naturalist on the Amazons*. The illustration of that little spectacled insect-hunter in trousers and a check shirt, standing with an insect net in a tropical forest, surrounded by infuriated toucans, fired me. Its effect was instant. I had never seen the tropics.

And what a name it is—the Amazons. And what a delightful book.

So off he goes.

And off we go in another direction after reading Robert Louis Stevenson's description of his travels with the donkey Modestine in the forest hills of the Cevennes. He covered only 120 miles in twelve days, and the donkey was just about as much of a nuisance as a donkey could be, refusing to move at all until she was thrashed, but what fun he got out of it, especially at night. It was this passage of Stevenson that first sent me sleeping out of doors at night. Listen :

Night is a dead, monotonous period under a roof ; but in the open world it passes lightly, with its stars and dews and perfumes, and the hours are marked by changes in the face of Nature. What seems a kind of death to people choked between walls and curtains is only a light and living slumber to the man who sleeps in the fields.

All night long he can hear Nature breathing deeply and freely. Even as she takes her rest, she turns and smiles : and there is one stirring hour unknown to those who dwell in houses when a wakeful in-

fluence goes abroad over the sleeping hemisphere. . . .

It is then that the cock first crows, not to announce the dawn, but like a cheerful watchman speeding the course of night. Cattle awake on the meadows, sheep break their fast on dewy hillsides, and change to a new lair among the ferns ; and houseless men, who have lain down with the fowls, open their dim eyes and behold the beauty of the night.

When that hour came to me among the pines I wakened thirsty. I emptied my tin of water in a draught. The stars were clear, coloured, and jewel-like, but not frosty. A faint silvery vapour stood for the Milky Way. All around me the black fir-points stood upright and stock-still. By the whiteness of the pack-saddle I could see Modestine walking round and round at the length of her tether : I could hear her steadily munching the grass ; but there was not another sound, save the indescribable quiet talk of the runnel over the stones. A faint wind, more like a moving coolness than a stream of air, passed down the glade from time to time, so that even in my great chamber the air was being renewed all night long.

I have not often enjoyed a more serene possession of myself.

As I thus lay, a faint noise stole towards

me through the pines. I thought, at first, it was the crowing of cocks or the barking of dogs at some very distant farm : but steadily it took shape in my ears, until I became aware that a passenger was going by upon the high road in the valley, and singing loudly as he went. There is a romance about all who are abroad in the black hours, and with something of a thrill we try to guess their business. But here the romance was double : first, in this glad passenger sending his voice up in music through the night ; and then I, buckled into my sack, alone in the pinewood between four and five thousand feet towards the stars.¹

That's how I want you to write ; that's what I call good travel-writing. It is fresh. It paints a vivid, exact picture, and it makes you want to go and live as Stevenson lived. For the dark isn't a thing to be afraid of, but to go adventuring in. You're only leading half a life if you haven't cultivated your night eyes as well as your day eyes.

And Stevenson reminded us of another most important thing about travel. It's not the

¹ From *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, by courtesy of Chatto & Windus.

destination that matters, but the journey and the way you travel. It's quite easy to go round the world and bring not a thing of interest back with you, and to remember Cairo only by the bad eggs you had for breakfast, and Calcutta by the fact that you overslept yourself there.

If you cultivate the habit now of getting a thrill and squeezing every ounce of interest in short easy distances, you'll find that it will continue with you when you go far afield.

So read all the travellers' tales you can lay your hands on, partly to whet your appetite to go where they've been and partly to learn how to describe places interestingly.

Read how, five hundred years ago, Marco Polo was taken at the age of fifteen from Venice across the plains of Tartary to the palace of the mighty Kubla Khan in China, and how he only got home again by escorting the lovely seventeen-year-old Princess Kukachin to her marriage to the Khan of Persia, a journey which lasted two years and lost them six hundred men on the way.

Read how the young Scots doctor, Mungo

Park, set off into the unknown interior of Africa in 1795 to discover the great River Niger, and how ten years later he went back to find its source, and after travelling a thousand miles in a canoe had to dive into the river to escape the spears and arrows of attacking natives and was drowned.

He had the spirit of the true traveller. Listen to this :

I shall set sail [he wrote in the last letter ever received from him] for the east with the fixed resolution to discover the source of the Niger or perish in the attempt. Though all the Europeans who are with me should die and though I were myself half dead I would still persevere, and if I could not succeed in the object of my journey, I would at least die on the Niger.

Read how that middle-aged Leicester botanist, Henry Walter Bates, of whom I have already told you, stayed on the Amazon for eleven years, enduring the most terrible hardships in order to collect 14,712 species of insects and flowers of which 8,000 had been up to that time unknown.

To be a good travel writer you have to have

the courage of Mungo Park, the powers of observation and patience of Bates, the ever-present passion to be roaming with a hungry heart, to sail beyond the sunset and the baths of all the western stars until you die, like Ulysses, and if you can, the capacity to write as well as Kinglake, the author of an Eastern travel-book called *Eothen*.

Here is Kinglake's description of the effect of sun in the desert. Listen :

The endless sands yield nothing but small stunted shrubs ; even these fail after the first two or three days, and from that time you pass over broad plains—you pass over newly reared hills—you pass through valleys dug out by the last week's storm—and the hills and valleys are sand, sand, sand, still sand, and only sand, and sand and sand again. The earth is so samely that your eyes turn towards heaven—the sky. You look at the sun. You are veiled and shrouded, but you know where he shines overhead by the touch of his flaming sword. No words are spoken, but your Arabs moan, your camels sigh, your skin glows, your shoulders ache, and for sights you see the pattern and the web of the silk that veils your eyes and the glare of the outer light.

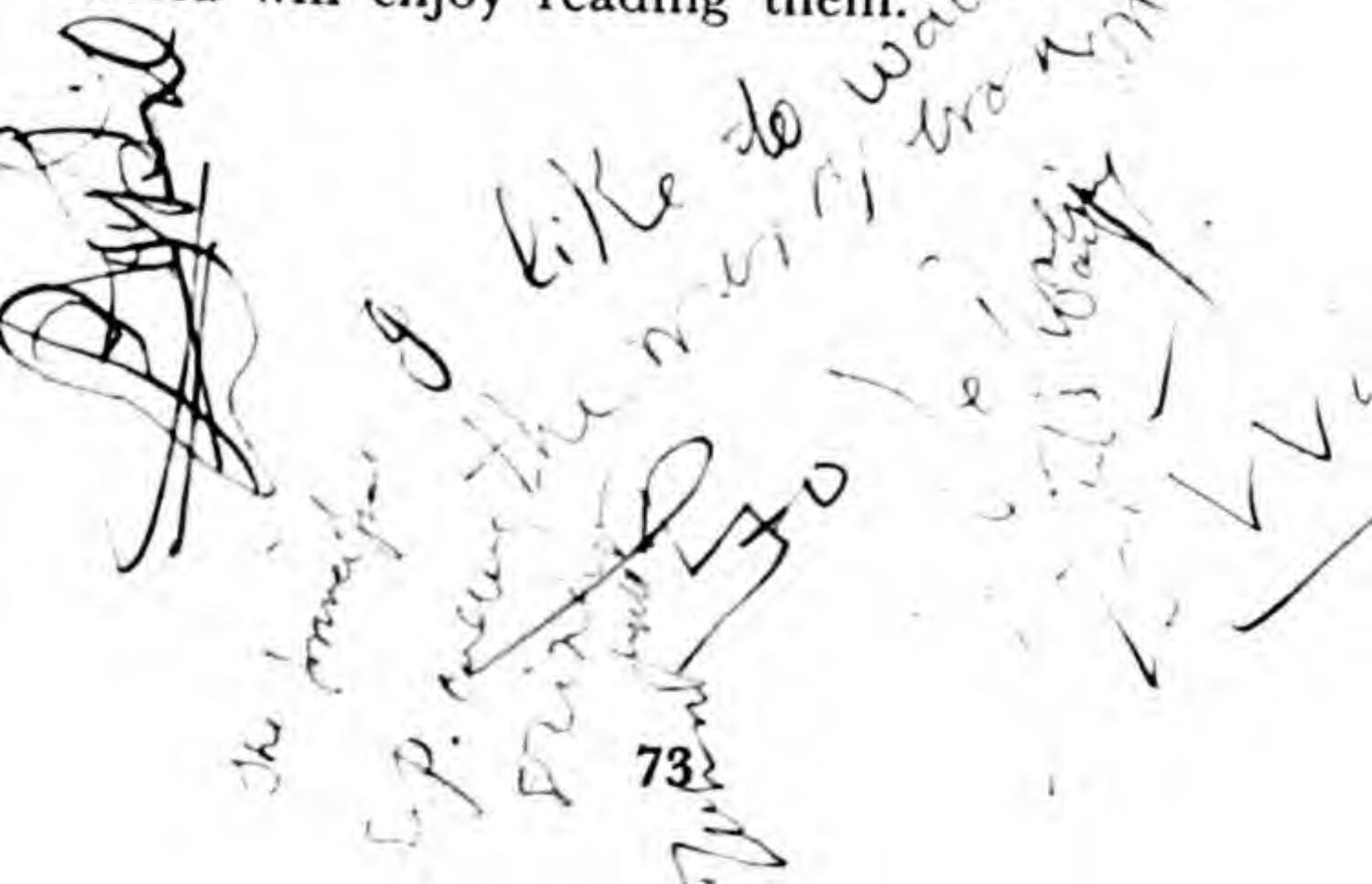
Time labours on—your skin glows, your shoulders ache, your Arabs moan, your camels sigh, and you see the same pattern in the silk and the same glare of light beyond : but time marches on and on and by and by the descending sun now softly touches your right arm, and you look again upon his face, for his power is all veiled in his beauty, and the redness of flames has become the redness of roses ; the world about you is all your own and there, where you will, you pitch your solitary tent.

I hope the picture has made you feel the heat and feel the sameness of the desert. If it doesn't conjure up a picture at least as vivid as a photograph it isn't any good at all.

Writing about places is just as interesting as writing about people, and just as difficult. You've got to watch their changing faces and study their different moods. One great advantage is that a place doesn't mind what you say about it, and a person often does. And in your travels you'll come across ugly places as well as beautiful. Your job is to describe what you see, not pretend that a thing is what it isn't. But it's beauty that you're looking for in the end.

So get out now. Don't wait. Imitate the mole in *The Wind in the Willows* and take your snouts out into the sunlight or at least into the fresh air. "This is fine," you'll say, just as Mole said: "This is better than whitewashing." And you may meet, as Mole met, Rat and Badger and perhaps Mr. Toad. You may even hear, as Mole heard, the magic music of the piper at the Gates of Dawn. It all depends how alive you are.

But whatever adventures you have, write them down while they're fresh in your mind, while you're going along, or as soon as ever you get home. If you enjoy writing them, the world will enjoy reading them.



VI

FICTION—TELLING A STORY

IN biography we write about chaps. In travel we write about maps. In fiction we combine the two and write about maps and chaps, places and people, and the fun of it is that neither the chaps nor the maps need really exist at all, outside our own brain.

Think of the map in *Treasure Island*. You may search the world over for that island, but you'll never find it, because it doesn't exist. Think of the chaps in *Treasure Island*. There never was such a person as Billy Bones or Jim Hawkins or Long John Silver, although you and I know exactly what they look like, how they talk, and how they behave. It is the cleverness of the author to make us believe in places and people that never existed.

In biography and travel you observe and take notes and remember facts about people

you've actually seen. In story-telling you bring your imagination into the game of writing for the first time. Probably you get the first idea or beginning of a plot for your story from something that really happened. The sight of a man in a bowler hat surrounded by a mob of children may have given the author of *Emil and the Detectives* the starting-point for the plot of that book, just as the sight of a puffed-up toad probably gave Kenneth Grahame the first idea for *The Wind in the Willows*.

But story-telling isn't only imagination. It can be, and it often is, a mixture of reality and fancy. *David Copperfield* is supposed to be an account of Dickens' own childhood, and Mr. Micawber is supposed to be drawn from Dickens' own father, but it isn't meant to be an exact portrait. In story-telling you are not tied down to facts. All that is required of you is that the story should sound true. You are free to invent anything you like. To suit your story you can kill off characters when you are tired of them, or you can move them about all over the world.

In story-writing you have much more free-

dom than in the other sorts of writing I have been talking about. You are freer in length, for a story may be any length, from a hundred words like one of *Æsop's Fables* to a million words like some of the novels that the Russians write.

You are freer in time, because your story can take place in any period in the world's history, far back as in Kipling's, *The Knife and the Naked Chalk*, to-day as in *Swallows and Amazons*, or in the future as in the novels of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne.

Be careful, though, about this, for if you want to write about the past, say, Bonnie Prince Charlie, you must know enough of the period to get the clothes right, the events historically correct, and the way of speaking right.

The same is true, of course, of the story you tell about to-day. It is only in the story of to-morrow that you can set your imagination going and let your characters wear any sort of clothes that you fancy, and talk and behave in the sort of queer way that you think that our descendants will talk and behave. To write a

story about the past you have to know a good deal about history, and to write about the future you ought to know a little modern science as well as have a vivid imagination. So probably you're wiser for your first story or two to stick to your own time. After all, there is plenty going on all round you to write millions of stories about.

But a story isn't as simple as a diary or a letter. You don't just sit down and write it. You have got to do a good deal of spade-work. First you've got to have the desire to write a story. Luckily or unluckily, nearly as many people try to write stories as read them.

Stories don't write themselves. You first have to hit on an idea, and you ought to make sure that it is an original idea. You don't want to add to the number of rubbishy school stories or love stories that you see wherever you turn.

Now what sort of story do you want to write? A ghost story, a detective story, a fairy-story, a treasure-hunting story, an animal story, a chronicle of family life? There's no end to the kind of story. You'll naturally write the kind

of story that most appeals to you, but I will give you this tip.

You are most likely to find readers for your story if you keep your characters on the move. It is astonishing how many of the grandest stories in the world have been about men and women roaming about from place to place.

Secondly, give them not only movement but action. Let things continually happen. The reason that *The Three Musketeers* is so popular is that the book moves at so breathless a pace from one excitement to another.

And thirdly, have you noticed how the most enjoyable books in the world are not only books in which the hero is always on the move, but tells his story himself in the first person?

Just look at this list. It contains pretty well all my favourite books and they are all written in the first person.

Huckleberry Finn. Huck tells his own story, and he's on the run down the Mississippi from first to last.

Treasure Island. Jim Hawkins tells his own story, and he's on the run across the ocean and across the island.

Kidnapped. David Balfour tells his own story, and he's on the run, being chased all over Scotland.

The Thirty-Nine Steps. David Hannay tells his own story, and he's on the run over the Scottish hills like David Balfour. ¶

Gulliver tells his own story in *Gulliver's Travels*, and Robinson Crusoe tells his. So does Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, and Jan Ridd in *Lorna Doone*, and Dickens in *David Copperfield* and George Borrow in *Lavengro*, and Captain Marryat in *Peter Simple* and Ralph Rover in *Coral Island*.

And that's a baker's dozen of the best books ever written.

If you take any of those as your model you won't go far wrong.

I'm not saying that good stories haven't been written in the third person. Most novels are written in the third person. Some quite famous novels have been written as letters. All I'm doing is reminding you of the rather surprising fact that so many of the top-notchers have been written in the first person.

And I believe there's a reason for this.

When you're writing in the first person you are nearer to the reader. He finds it easier to believe what you are telling him. And there's also this. When you are writing in the first person you are unlikely to make your hero—that is yourself—as perfect as you might if you wrote about him in the third person.

Your object in writing a story is not to make people out to be all black or all white, but to make them human, with a lot of good and a good deal that is not so good about them.

You can model your characters, as Dickens did, on real people, and then let your fancy play round them. Only be careful not to let your imagination run away with you so far that you are not in complete control of your characters' actions, for characters have a habit of running away with creators. When Shakespeare created Shylock the Jew he had no intention of making him the hero.

Your first job, therefore, is to get your plot and to get it clear. Then you begin to assemble your characters and the places you want them to live in and move about in. At

this stage you will be wise to regard yourself as a sort of architect. Your plot is the plan of the house. (You know exactly how much ground you have at your disposal, how many rooms you have to put in, and the general final appearance of the house before you start to put one brick on top of another.

This is very important, because many people start to write stories without thinking out any plot or what is going to happen to any of the characters.

You, with more sense, will sit down and make a map of the town where your characters live. It's a purely imaginary town and you make it what you like, but if you once make it clear that it takes the hero ten minutes to drive to the station don't forget that fact and make him run it in two minutes. Don't, as I once did, send your heroine out on a country walk in a pink frock and bring her home in a blue one.

And be quite certain what each of your characters looks like as well as how he dresses, and let his way of speaking betray the kind of person he is. You know what kind of person

Mr. Micawber is the second he opens his mouth. Listen :

" My dear young friend," said Mr. Micawber, " I am older than you : a man of some experience in life . . . and of some experience ; in short, in difficulties, generally speaking. At present, and until something turns up (which I am, I may say, hourly expecting) I have nothing to bestow but advice. Still, my advice is so far worth taking that—in short, I have never taken it myself, and am the"—here Mr. Micawber, who had been beaming and smiling, all over his head and face, up to the present moment, checked himself and frowned—" the miserable wretch you behold. My piece of advice, Copperfield, you know. Annual income £20, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income £20, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery. The blossom is blighted, the leaf is withered, the God of Day goes down upon the dreary scene—and—and in short you are for ever floored. As I am ! "

To make his example the more impressive, Mr. Micawber drank a glass of punch with an air of great enjoyment and satisfaction, and whistled the College Hornpipe.

At one moment this strange man is so depressed that you think he is going to com-

mit suicide, and half an hour later he is polishing his shoes and going out, humming quite happily. Having written a heart-rending letter to young Copperfield, he is then seen on the top of the coach eating walnuts out of a paper bag, with a bottle sticking out of his breast-pocket.

Well, that's how characters are created, by making them behave as absurdly as real people behave. That was Dickens' way.

A good deal of *David Copperfield* was based on Dickens' own life, as I said. When he felt like inventing he invented, and when he felt like remembering he remembered. I think that is a good way to write a story.

Micawber was partly a portrait of his father and partly pure imagination. The result is a far more interesting character than we should have had if Dickens had been content to give us just a photograph of his father. And he takes the trouble to let us see him exactly. This is how he describes him :

A stoutish, middle-aged person, in a brown coat and black tights and shoes, with no more hair upon his head (which was a

large one, and very shining) than there is upon an egg, and a very large face. His clothes were shabby, but he wore an enormous shirt collar. He carried a jaunty sort of stick with a large pair of rusty tassels to it, and an eye-glass hung outside his coat for ornament, I afterwards found, as he very seldom looked through it, and couldn't see anything when he did.

This sort of character-drawing is difficult. It means watching people's odd ways very carefully, and yet avoiding exaggerating them so that they become nothing more than a catalogue of eccentricities. For Micawber, though a very great fool, was very lovable, and it is not altogether easy to make so foolish a person sound both real and likable.

This is partly why I recommended you to keep your characters on the run, and have plenty of things happening to them. It is a great deal easier inventing accidents and excitements than it is inventing a lot of characters. What I mean is that you'll find it much easier to write another *Treasure Island* than a second *David Copperfield*, in spite of the fact that *Treasure Island* is all imagination, and *David*

Copperfield is about half memory and recollection and only half imagination.

Take this as a model. It's good, and it's much easier to imitate :

About three o'clock of a bitter, foggy, frosty afternoon I was standing at the door when I saw someone drawing slowly near along the road. He was plainly blind, for he tapped before him with a stick, and wore a great green shade over his eyes and nose ; and he was hunched, as if with age and weakness, and wore a huge old tattered sea-cloak with a hood, that made him appear positively deformed. I never saw in my life a more dreadful-looking figure.

He stopped a little from the inn, and raising his voice in an odd sing-song, addressed the air in front of him :

“ Will any kind friend inform a poor blind man who has lost the precious sight of his eyes in the gracious defence of his native country, England, and God bless King George ! where or in what part of this country he may now be ? ”

“ You are at the ‘Admiral Benbow,’ Black Hill Cove, my good man,” said I.

“ I hear a voice,” said he, “ a young voice. Will you give me your hand, my kind friend, and lead me in ? ”

I held out my hand, and the horrible, soft-spoken, eyeless creature gripped it in a moment like a vice. I was so much startled that I struggled to withdraw, but the blind man pulled me close up to him with a single action of his arm.

"Now, boy," he said, "take me to the captain. Come now, march!"

And I never heard a voice so cruel, and cold, and ugly as that blind man's. \times

It is always easier to make your reader's blood curdle than it is to make him smile or just be interested in the growth of character, but if you are going to write a detective or murder story be careful not to pile on the agony too thick and have too much bloodshed or you'll simply make your reader laugh instead of being thrilled.

You've got this to remember about the people you meet in stories. If the story is well written we know the characters better and like or dislike them far more than anyone we meet in ordinary life. In real life we find it difficult to get under the skins of other people, to know them as they really are, however nearly related to them we may be, but in the best-written

books there is nothing about them that we don't know.

And if you think for half a minute you'll see why this is so. Our friends in life can't always explain why they behave in this way or that, any more than we can ourselves, but a character in a book is shown us, as it is called, in the round.

We know his inmost thoughts. We know the reason for everything he does. There is nothing whatever hidden from us. And that is why we make such close friends of people in books, of Huckleberry Finn, of Jane Eyre, of Maggie Tulliver, of Jo in *Little Women*, of Kim, Alice, Oliver Twist, Emil, David Balfour, Robinson Crusoe, Jim Hawkins and the Would-Be-Goods.

And I can't see any reason why you shouldn't add to the number. So let your imagination rip, and write me a story. Write it in the first person and make yourself the hero or heroine, if you find it easier that way, and give yourself the sorts of adventures you'd most like to have if you ever got the chance. Don't worry about its length or how much ground you cover.

THE FUN OF WRITING

Some stories cover about a hundred years, and others, just as good, about a hundred minutes.

What matters isn't the length or the time, but whether it reads like the truth.

It is fun writing tales of everyday life, about the people you know and the things that happen to them. Dickens did that in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

But it is also fun to let your imagination rip and write stories about people and things you've never met or seen, and are never likely to meet or see.

What sort of life do people lead on Mars, supposing there are any people on Mars? What sort of life do the fish live at the bottom of the deepest ocean, and what sort of fish are they?

Suppose that a plague of ants suddenly swarmed all over the world and became so powerful that they took possession? What sort of a world would it be? Imagine an England in which a toad is dictator, or a tortoise or a tadpole.

Most of us get these wild ideas of what would happen if things were not as they are, but very

few of us seem able to follow up the idea and make a good story out of a wild idea. (And the reason is that a good story must convince us of its truth even if it could never happen. We like *Gulliver's Travels* because we feel that if there was an island where the inhabitants were small enough to walk about on one's hand, they would behave as they behave in *Gulliver's Travels*.

And to-day there is still living, and very much living, a most entertaining writer called H. G. Wells, who for years has been writing tales of wonder about things that have never happened, and we hope never will happen, and they are good because he makes us feel while we are reading that if ever they did happen they would happen just as he makes them happen. That is called making your story plausible. You can think of the wildest plot imaginable, but having thought of it you've got to make your story read sensibly. It may be a nightmare, but unlike an ordinary nightmare it has got to have some order, some reasonableness about it. It has got to be plausible.

Here's an example from a collection of Wells' stories called *Tales of Wonder*.¹ He sets out to tell us about a man who could work miracles.

Well, you and I have often probably wanted the power to work miracles, and we know that some people have very strong wills, and by wishing certain things hard enough claim to get them. Well, the hero of this story doesn't have to wish hard at all. It just comes natural to him.

He is a little red-headed freckled city clerk, and his name is George McWhirter Fotheringay. When we first meet him he is sitting in the bar of the Long Dragon with a full glass of beer in his hand, voicing his opinion that there aren't any such things as miracles, and as an illustration says :

"Someone, it might be me, comes along here and stands as it might be here, and says to that lamp, as I might do, collecting all my will—Turn upsy-down without breaking and go on burning steady, and— Hullo ! "

It was enough to make anybody say

¹ By kind permission of the author.

“Hullo !” The impossible was visible to all. The lamp hung upside down in the air, and burning quietly with its flame pointing down.

No one was more surprised than the miracle-worker. He stared at the lamp for about three seconds, and then cried out, “I can’t keep it up any longer,” and the lamp fell to the floor and went out.

Everybody in the pub accused Fotheringay of doing a silly conjuring trick, and he himself was completely in the dark as to what had happened.

When he got home in the darkness he said, “I wish I had a match : let there be a match in that hand,” and immediately there was a match in his hand. He then willed the candle to be lit, himself to be in bed without the trouble of undressing, and a new soft woollen nightshirt to cover him. All these things happened. He then willed himself to be asleep. And he was asleep. The next morning he wished himself an extra egg for breakfast, and he got that, and when the policeman came to argue with him about smashing the lamp in the pub the night before he willed

him first in Hades and then in San Francisco, and the policeman vanished. Then, as an experiment, he turns a tobacco-jar first into a bowl of violets and then into a blue pigeon, and then becomes (as you and I probably would become if we'd been he) more ambitious.

There seems to be no limit to his power. He improves the railway services and cures the Vicar's wart, and then, while he is walking about at three o'clock in the morning intoxicated by success, a friend suggests his stopping the moon.

Mr. Fotheringay looked at the moon. "That's a bit tall," he said.

"Why not?" says his friend. "Of course the moon doesn't stop. You stop the earth. It isn't as if we were doing any harm."

And this is where H. G. Wells' grand imagination comes in.

Fotheringay buttoned up his jacket and with as much confidence as he could, said: "Jest stop going round, will you."

And immediately he was flying head over heels through the air at the rate of dozens of miles a minute. In spite of the innumerable circles he was describing per second,

he thought ; he thought in a second and willed, " Let me come down safe and sound. Whatever else happens, let me down safe and sound."

He willed it only just in time, for his clothes, heated by his rapid flight through the air, were already beginning to singe. He came down with a forcible bump in what appeared to be a mound of fresh-turned earth. A large mass of metal and masonry, extraordinarily like the clock-tower in the middle of the market-square, hit the earth near him, ricochetted over him, and flew into stonework, bricks and masonry, like a bursting bomb. A hurtling cow hit one of the large blocks and smashed like an egg. There was a crash that made all the most violent crashes of his past life seem like the sound of falling dust, and this was followed by a descending series of lesser crashes. A vast wind roared throughout earth and heaven, so that he could scarcely lift his head to look. For a while he was too breathless and astonished even to see where he was or what had happened. And his first movement was to feel his head and reassure himself that his streaming hair was still his own.

" Lord ! " gasped Mr. Fotheringay, scarce able to speak for the gale, " I've had a squeak ! What's gone wrong ? Storms and

thunder. And only a minute ago a fine night. *What a wind!* If I go on fooling in this way I'm bound to have a thundering accident! . . .”

He looked about him so far as his flapping jacket would permit. The appearance of things was really extremely strange. “The sky's all right, anyhow, and that's about all that is all right. And even there it looks like a terrific gale coming up. But there's the moon overhead. Just as it was just now. Bright as midday. But as for the rest—Where's the village? Where's—where's anything? And what on earth set this wind a-blowing? *I didn't order no wind.*”

Mr. Fotheringay struggled to get to his feet in vain, and after one failure, remained on all fours, holding on. He surveyed the moonlit world to leeward, with the tails of his jacket streaming over his head.

“There's something seriously wrong,” said Mr. Fotheringay. “And what it is—goodness knows.”

Far and wide nothing was visible in the white glare through the haze of dust that drove before a screaming gale but tumbled masses of earth and heaps of ruins, no trees, no houses, no familiar shapes, only a wilderness of disorder vanishing at last into the darkness beneath the whirling columns and

streamers, the lightnings and thunderings of a swiftly rising storm. Near him in the livid glare was something that might once have been an elm tree, a smashed mass of splinters, shivered from boughs to base, and further a twisted mass of iron girders—only too evidently the viaduct—rose out of the piled confusion.

You see, when Mr. Fotheringay had stopped the earth going round he had forgotten to say anything about the people and things on it. And the earth spins so fast that when it stopped, everything on its surface, the village, and Mr. Fotheringay, and everybody and everything had been jerked violently forward at about nine miles a second—that is to say, much more violently than if they had been fired out of a cannon. And every human being, every living creature, every house, and every tree—all the world as we know it—had been so jerked and smashed and utterly destroyed. That was all.

These things Mr. Fotheringay did not, of course, fully appreciate. But he perceived that his miracle had miscarried, and with that a great disgust of miracles came upon him. He was in darkness now, for the clouds had swept together and blotted out his momentary glimpse of the moon, and the air was full of fitful struggling tortured

wraiths of hail. A great roaring of wind and waters filled earth and sky, and, peering under his hand through the dust and sleet to windward, he saw by the play of the lightnings a vast wall of water pouring towards him.

"Stop!" cried Mr. Fotheringay, to the advancing water. "Oh, for goodness' sake, stop!"

"Just a moment," said Mr. Fotheringay to the lightnings and thunder. "Stop jest a moment while I collect my thoughts. . . . And now what shall I do? What *shall* I do?"

"I know, and for goodness' sake let's get it right *this* time."

He remained on all fours, leaning against the wind, very intent to have everything right.

"Ah! Let nothing what I'm going to order happen until I say 'Off!' . . . Lord! I wish I'd thought of that before!"

He lifted his little voice against the whirlwind, shouting louder and louder in the vain desire to hear himself speak. "Now then!—here goes! Mind about that what I said just now. In the first place, when all I've got to say is done, let me lose my miraculous power, let my will become just like anybody else's will, and all these dangerous miracles be stopped. I don't

like them. I'd rather I didn't work 'em. Ever so much. That's the first thing. And the second is—let me be back just before the miracles begin ; let everything be just as it was before that blessed lamp turned up. It's a big job, but it's the last. Have you got it ? No more miracles, everything as it was—me back in the Long Dragon just before I drank my half-pint. That's it ! Yes."

He dug his fingers into the mould, closed his eyes, and said "Off!"

Everything became perfectly still. He perceived that he was standing erect.

"So you say," said a voice.

He opened his eyes. He was in the bar of the Long Dragon, arguing about miracles, the full glass of beer in his hand, and the lamp burning the right side up above his head as usual.

Well, scientifically, that smashing up of everything is what would happen if someone had the power to reverse the natural law. So now even if you can't work a miracle, you do at least know what a miracle is. It's as George McWhirter Fotheringay says, "Something contrariwise to the course of Nature done by power of will."

Well, all these *Tales of Wonder* are tales of miracles, of something contrariwise to the course of Nature.

Wells tells another story about a very fat man who wanted to get his weight down. About half the world seems to be filled with fat people who want to be thin, and of thin people who want to get fat. But this fat man, whose name was Pyecraft, always boring his friends in the club about the misery of being fat, made a mistake in accuracy which cost him dearly. He got hold of a queer old recipe from the East which was said to reduce weight. Well, it did reduce his weight. What was wrong with that? Just this: it reduced his weight but not his size. He forgot to ask for a medicine to make him thin. He was still a fat man, but he was so light that he floated in the air like a balloon. He couldn't stay on the floor. He finds himself crawling along the top of the ceiling like a fly.

It was really a most extraordinary spectacle, that great, fat, apoplectic-looking man upside down and trying to get from the ceiling to the floor. "Let me help you!"

I said, and took his hand and pulled him down. He kicked about, trying to get foothold somewhere. It was just like holding a flag on a windy day.

“That table,” he said, pointing, “is solid mahogany and very heavy. If you can put me under that——”

I did, and there he wallowed about like a captive balloon, while I stood on his hearthrug and talked to him.

“I can’t sleep,” he said.

But that was no great difficulty. “Sleep *under* the bed,” I said, “and tie your mattress on the under side of it.” He would have to tell his housekeeper, I said; and after some squabbling he agreed to that. He could have a ladder in his room, and all his meals could be laid on the top of his bookcase. We also hit on an ingenious device by which he could get to the floor whenever he wanted to, which was simply to put some heavy books on the top of his open shelves. He just pulled out a couple of volumes and held on, and down he came. And we agreed there must be iron rungs along the walls, so that he could cling to those whenever he wanted to get about the room on the lower level.

I spent two days at his flat. I am a handy, interfering sort of man with a screwdriver, and I made all sorts of ingenious adaptations

for him—ran a wire to bring his bells within reach, turned all his electric lights up instead of down, and so on. The whole affair was extremely curious and interesting to me, and it was delightful to think of Pyecraft like some great, fat blow-fly, crawling about on his ceiling, and clambering round the lintel of his doors from one room to another, and never, never, never coming to the club any more. . . . We were safe from the old bore there, anyway.

Then, you know, my fatal ingenuity got the better of me. I was sitting by his fire drinking his whisky, and he was up in his favourite corner by the cornice, tacking a Turkey carpet to the ceiling, when the idea struck me. "By Jove, Pyecraft!" I said, "all this is totally unnecessary."

And before I could calculate the complete consequences of my notion, I blurted it all. "Lead underclothes," said I, and the mischief was done.

Pyecraft received the thing almost in tears. "To be right ways up again—" he said.

I gave him the whole secret before I saw where it would take me. "Buy sheet lead," I said, "stamp it into discs. Sew 'em all over your underclothes until you have enough. Have lead-soled boots, carry a bag of solid lead, and the thing is done! Instead of

being a prisoner here you may go abroad again, Pyecraft ; you may travel——”

A still happier idea came to me. “ You need never fear a shipwreck. All you need do is just slip off some or all of your clothes, take the necessary amount of luggage in your hand, and float up in the air——”

In his emotion he dropped the tack-hammer within an ace of my head. “ By Jove ! ” he said, “ I shall be able to come back to the club again.”

The thing pulled me up short. “ By Jove ! ” I said, faintly. “ Yes. Of course —you will. You’ll be able to come back to the club again.”

He did. He does. There he sits behind me now, stuffing—as I live ! —a third go of buttered tea-cake. And no one in the whole world knows—except his housekeeper and me—that he weighs practically nothing.”

All because he asked for a medicine to reduce his weight instead of a medicine to make him thin.

So you see the penalty of not saying exactly what you mean.

And you see also that supposing there were a medicine to reduce your weight, that would be the logical result of your swallowing it.

But it requires a very unusual imagination to have worked it out. You'll soon see how difficult it is if you try to write the story of a thin girl who swallows a medicine to put on weight, not flesh. She stays as thin as she is, but goes on increasing in weight until she weighs about as much as a battleship. That'll be a tale of wonder, if not a wonderful tale. But because it's difficult it's all the more fun trying to work it out. Here are three more ideas to be going on with.

Try writing the story of a man who suddenly started living his life backwards. This year he's thirty, next year he'll be twenty-nine, and so on.

What would happen if there suddenly appeared a star that got nearer and nearer to the earth, and got bigger than the moon and hotter than the sun? There's a story for you. Work it out and then compare it with the story that H. G. Wells wrote on this very subject.

Suppose you went into a toyshop and as soon as you got inside you found that the conjuring tricks started working themselves—white rabbits came tumbling out of your

pockets and all the toys came to life and showed you round. The dolls started talking, the aeroplanes started flying, and the motor-cars tooting all over the place.

Well, I'm not writing the story for you. Get going on one of these. There's just no end to the stories you can write if you only let your imagination rip as H. G. Wells does in his *Tales of Wonder*. But don't forget that you've got to make these tales of wonder plausible. You've got to make your readers believe that in spite of their impossibility they really happened, or might happen. That's the secret of the trick.

VII

DRAMA—ACTING—STORY

THE first thing to do before starting to write a play is to get a story that will act. You can have as many elephants, camels, lions and tigers as you like in a zoo or a circus, but they are likely to be a nuisance on the stage. You've got to find a man or woman worth writing about and someone who will fit the stage. Good plays have been written about Joan of Arc, Napoleon, Pepys, Doctor Johnson, Clive of India, Richard II, Mary Queen of Scots, Henry VIII, Charlotte Brontë, Mr. and Mrs. Browning, and Abraham Lincoln, because their characters were interesting and interesting things happened to them. A very good play could be written about Lawrence of Arabia or Grace Darling.

So one way of writing a play is to take some well-known characters in history and

make them relive the most exciting parts of their lives over again. They ought to be ultra-fine characters or ultra-bad characters, outstanding in heroism or in villainy.

This time you're not going to describe what they did or how they felt as you do in telling their story in biography. You're going to put back the clock, see them do the things they did, dress as they used to dress, talk as they used to talk, and behave as you think they behaved.

You've got to put them on a stage, and you've got to cram into three hours enough of their speech and action to make your audience feel as excited about them as if they were really alive.

You needn't of course stick to people who have been famous in history. There have been just as exciting plays about people who never lived at all, Sherlock Holmes, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Bulldog Drummond, Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, Robinson Crusoe and Charley's Aunt, for instance, as about any people who really lived.

The thing you've got to remember, whether

you take your characters from history or your own village, or invent them, is that you've got to make something happen to them. You've got to select some point in their lives which affects their whole future.

In a novel or biography you have time and space to tell all their lives. In a play you haven't, and even if you had it would be difficult to get actors to represent your character from babyhood to old age. You've only got about three hours on the stage, and the nearer you can keep to that as the time you set out to cover, the more easy you will find it to make the audience believe that they are watching something that is actually happening. For that is your main object, to be what is called plausible, that is as near life as you can.

For this reason you ought not to keep your characters dodging about all over the place. In a play like "Clive of India", naturally Clive has to be shown in India and at home, but so far as you can you ought to keep your characters more or less in the same place. In most plays you'll find that the whole thing

takes place in one room. Quite apart from anything else, it makes it cheaper to act, which is important. This too is partly the reason why you ought not to crowd the stage with characters. There are ninety-eight characters in *Pickwick*, and in a novel this doesn't matter, but you ought to get through a play with about a dozen.

If you cut them out in cardboard and build in cardboard a stage for them and move them about as puppets, a very jolly game which all writers of plays spend a lot of time doing, you'll soon see that twelve is quite a large enough number to keep under control.

I know that Shakespeare disobeyed all these rules ; he had scores of characters, he kept on changing the scene, and he didn't mind years clapsing between the acts, and when you can write as well as Shakespeare and have as much to say, you can play the same tricks, but at first you'll be wiser to go slow and obey the traffic rules. You've got quite enough to do without running into extra trouble.

First you have to make your characters reveal what sort of people they are, mean,

cowardly, jealous, brave, funny or generous, not by saying so, but more indirectly by something that they do, something in their behaviour. You won't just have them walking up and down the stage like sandwich men saying, "I'm a very noble fellow," or "I'm a villain," unless they're being consciously or unconsciously funny. You've got to be clever enough to present them in such a way that the audience find out for themselves what they are like, in the way we find out about people in real life.

Next, you have to keep your audience in suspense. You've first of all got to rouse in the audience a sense of interest in the affairs of the people on the stage, and then you've got to keep them wondering what is going to happen to them.

The first two acts—there are usually three acts altogether—ought to end on a note of intense excitement, working up to the final climax in the last act where you have to solve all the riddles and clear up all the muddle that you have created at the beginning.

Play-writing is more difficult than most

other sorts of writing, because you've got to keep the plot on the move the whole time. In a novel you can sit back and describe places and your characters reveal themselves in all sorts of ways, while in a play they have only two ways of revealing themselves, by what they say and what they do. What they say has to be short and snappy—you know how quickly you get bored on the films when there are only sticky love-scenes—and what they do mustn't be all bloodshed or love-making or kicking up a row, otherwise it becomes absurd. You'll find that on the stage, just as in real life, you get the best effect if you keep quiet.

If you watch the best actors—Charles Laughton, for instance—you'll see that they make your flesh creep or make you roar with laughter by little subtle gestures. Laughton gives you the whole soul of the perfect butler in the first minute or two of that grand film, "Ruggles of Red Gap". Just by walking in a peculiar way, by a wink, by the intonation of the voice, the way he fingers his tie, or opens a book, a man can give away his character just

as much as by what he says, and a good actor can help the author to bring the part to life, as much as a bad actor can prevent a character from coming to life. Then you've got to be very careful to keep your dialogue very short. If your characters begin making long speeches you'll only send your audience to sleep.

Here is the beginning of a play about King Alfred. The scene is the interior of a cowherd's hut in Somerset. You've always got to explain exactly where your scene is first.

There enters the cowherd followed by King Alfred, who is in rags and shivering with cold, carrying a bow and a few broken arrows. There's a log fire smoking in one corner.

The cowherd speaks first, scratching the back of his head : "Reckon t'old 'ooman 'ull be baack zoon."

THE KING. "We are very hungry."

COWHERD. "Reckon t'old 'ooman 'ull be baack zoon. She be a baaking."

(THE KING *sits down by the fire.*)

(*The Cowherd's Wife comes bustling in with newly kneaded loaves on a tray. She puts*

them in front of fire and the COWHERD whispers to her and she mutters something back. Then she goes up to THE KING.)

Now these are called stage directions and you can't write a play without them. You have to see the scene so clearly while you're writing it that you have to tell your imaginary characters when and how to move, scratch their heads, pick things up and put them down, and so on.

Having crossed to the King, the Cowherd's wife says: "If ye be staying here ye must make yourself useful."

THE KING (*getting up and bowing*). "We should be delighted to do anything in our power."

COWHERD'S WIFE (*looking at him suspiciously*). "I'ze warrant ye be strange in these parts." (*Turns to her husband*.) "If he'll look to t' baatch whiles I zee to t' cows, maybe ee'll get a morsel for his pains." (To THE KING.) "Now do ee be zure, stranger, ye turn the baatch when they are done on one side."

THE KING (*bowing*). "We shall be delighted."

COWHERD'S WIFE (*to her husband*). "I reckon he do be daaft."

COWHERD. "He's no daaft : he be strange."

WIFE. "See ee turn the baatch."

COWHERD. "Oo ! Ar ! "

Wife goes out slamming door. King sits and begins to mend his broken arrows, and then says : "Do you care for verse—poetry ? "

COWHERD (*scratching head*). "Oo ! Ar ! "

THE KING. "Then we will repeat to you a few little things we composed in the marshes :

There are clouds in the sky,
 I'm afraid it will rain.
 I cannot think why
 There are clouds in the sky.
 Had I wings I would fly
 To the deserts of Spain.
 There are clouds in the sky,
 I'm afraid it will rain.

That's called a triolet."

COWHERD. "Oo ! Ar ! "

He reads another poem. The Cowherd's wife comes back, picks up the loaves, which are now burnt, and says : "Drat th' man ! If they bain't all burnt ! Drat th' man if I

haven't half a mind to give un a beating with th' rolling-pin ! Good-for-nothing-idle-vagabond, wastrel, ramscallion, thief, robber ! ”

COWHERD. “ Easy, old 'ooman, ee be th' King ! ”

COWHERD's WIFE. “ I'm sure I beg your Majesty's humble pardon ; I'm sure I knew nothing and meant no harm. I do for to beg your Majesty's pardon. And me always a-wanting to see a real Dane, too ! Only yesterday I zaid t' Mary, ‘ Mary, I do say the Danes be all over the country.’ ‘ Lord a mercy ! ’ she zay, ‘ who be they ? ’ ‘ I bain't zet eyes on one yet,’ zay I, ‘ but folks do zay as they be mighty pleasant folk,’ and now I have the King of the Danes himself in my hut.”

COWHERD. “ Ye be mistaken, ye be. He bain't the Danish King, he be t'other, he that were th' King of England—bor ! ”

WIFE. “ Which ? He as be driven away like ? ”

COWHERD. “ Oo ! Ar ! ”

COWHERD's WIFE (*to KING*). “ Oh ! you be he, be you ? Then you ought to be ashamed of yoursel', that ye ought, coming into strange

folks' houses at this time of day, begging for bread. Ye'd best be a-going, and that quick ! Bor ! No rubbish here, out ye go, ye scurvy traitor, and that quick, ye knave, or else I'll bring my rolling-pin to ye ! ”

That's how a play should be written. It moves quickly. It is vivid. It keeps you in suspense. You never know what's going to happen next. Things happen. You can see how the people behave. It's meant, of course, to make us laugh, but it's not altogether absurd. It might have happened like that. Play-writing of this sort simply puts history back into action.

Legend just says that King Alfred, fleeing from the Danes, took shelter in a cowherd's cottage, and while there burnt some cakes that he was given to look after. What actually happened we never know, but the man who rewrites this incident as a play has to see the whole thing so clearly that he knows how they all dressed, how they all walked, how they moved, how they changed in their ideas from one minute to another.

Play-writing to-day is of three kinds. You

can write your play to be acted on a stage, to be filmed, or broadcast. And each of these is a little different from the rest. The stage play is the oldest. Its advantage is that you really do see the actors in the flesh. You really see the cottage-kitchen or the steamer-cabin or the railway waiting-room, or a pretty good imitation of it.

In the film you see photographs of the actors and only hear a record of their voices, but so good are the photographs and the records that you sometimes forget that and believe that you are really seeing and hearing them in person. The advantage of the film is that it can show you much finer scenery. It can take you up in the air, on the sea, over the desert, through the jungle, or to the busy city streets. Both time and distance are more easily covered than they are on the stage.

In a wireless play you see nothing. You have to get the whole effect through your ears, which means that you pay far more attention to the voice than you do if you are watching actors act. And it has the great advantage that millions of people can hear it at once

without even getting up out of their easy chairs, while in a play the actors have to go on acting the same play for hundreds of performances.

I have heard one very good broadcast play. It is all about village cricket and it is called *Badger's Green*. In the first place it follows the stage tradition of being condensed in time into a day or so. Then there are only about half a dozen characters. It begins with a little music and then each of the main characters is introduced saying a typical sentence out of the play, just as on the films the face of each of the main characters is flashed on the screen, so that you won't get confused when the play begins.

Then you are told what the scene is. On the wireless you can't yet see it, so you are told to imagine a study where a village cricket committee meeting is being held, and two of the oldest members, the President, an old doctor, and the Captain, a fiery-tempered retired major, are having a first-rate quarrel over whose wife shall superintend the tea for the great forthcoming match on the following Wednesday. They are, however, united again

on discovering that a man called Butler is planning to build a lot of bungalows on the downs near the village. They agree to fight him, and that is the end of Act I.

On the stage there is usually an interval between acts of fifteen minutes. On the radio the interval is usually about fifteen seconds, filled with music.

Act II brings us to the next morning, and we hear Mr. Butler promise the doctor a hospital and the major the management of all the sports in his developed village, which makes them think differently about his scheme. Only the slow bowler Mr. Twigg, who stammers a little and does a lot of fretwork, stands out against him.

In Act III we have arrived at the morning of the great cricket match and Mr. Twigg has cut himself with a chisel and can't play, so they get Mr. Butler to take his place.

In the last act, which is much the most exciting, we hear the last two wickets of Badger's Green fall. Fourteen runs are wanted to win. First the doctor's son is caught at the wicket, when only six are wanted. Then the

last wicket but one falls when two are wanted, and Mr. Butler goes in last, and scores the winning run off his bare knuckles.

Now, on the films it would be easy to watch the actual match, the men running between the wickets, the fielder dropping a catch, and Butler scoring off his knuckles. On the radio we can hear the ball go off the bat, the shouts and the clapping, and the batsmen throwing down their bats in the pavilion, but we've got to use our imagination more.

It's important to notice that in the play the author only gives us the fall of the last two wickets. In real life we should probably watch the whole match with interest, in a novel or story both innings would be described, but in a play you've only got time to select the dramatic climax or top note of excitement.

That's what makes play-writing more difficult than other kinds of writing. You can't afford to have a single sentence that doesn't help on the story. Notice how this is done in the play version of *The Wind in the Willows*. It's called "Toad of Toad Hall". The scene is a secret passage, and the four conspirators,

Badger, Rat, Mole, and Toad, are on their way to dislodge the Weasels who have taken possession, in his absence, of Toad's mansion. Badger and Mole are carrying lanterns. All four are armed to the teeth. This is how the stage version goes :

BADGER *says to RAT.* Hsh !

RAT *to MOLE.* Hsh !

MOLE *to TOAD.* Hsh !

TOAD *loudly.* What ?

ALL THREE. Hsh !

TOAD. Oh ! All right.

BADGER. We are now in the secret passage. Mole and I burst into the banqueting hall by the east door, and drive them towards the west door, where Rat and Toad—

TOAD. That's all right, Badger ; let's get at 'em !

BADGER. Rat, you're responsible for the operations on the western front. You understood ? . . . What's the matter ?

RAT (*who is trying to read something by the light of MOLE's lantern*). Hadn't we better make sure we've got everything ? (*Reading.*) One belt, one sword, one cutlass, one cudgel, one pair pistols, one policeman's truncheon, one policeman's whistle— (**TOAD** *blows his loudly.*)

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BADGER (*alarmed*). What's that?

MOLE (*reproachfully*). Toad!

BADGER. Was that you, Toad?

TOAD. I just wanted to be sure it worked.

RAT. One policeman's whistle, two pairs of handcuffs, bandages, sticking plaster, flask, sandwich case. Pistol's in reserve. Eh, Moly?

MOLE. Of course. Eh, Toad?

TOAD (*who is looking at his*). Of course. (*It goes off with a tremendous bang.*)

RAT. We'll take his pistols and his whistle away. (*Does so.*)

BADGER. Now, then, no more talking. From this moment absolute silence.

TOAD (*humbly*). Just before we begin the silence.

BADGER. Well—what is it?

TOAD. A-a-a-a-tishoo. That's all. I felt it coming. Now I won't say another word.¹

You see how that keeps up the suspense. It's snappy, it moves, it's exciting, and it's funny. It's good play-writing, whether on the screen, wireless or stage. Play-writing I think is the most difficult form of writing. That is why I have left it till now. It is the most concentrated. It is the most alive.

¹ From *The Wind in the Willows*. By kind permission of Mrs. Kenneth Grahame and Messrs. Methuen & Co., Ltd.

But you've got to watch very carefully what goes and what fails on the cinema, on the stage and over the air, before you can hope to be much good. Begin with simple stories like Canute trying to turn the tide back, or the murder of Cæsar, or the climax of a cricket match.

VIII

ANIMAL POETRY

I KEEP on meeting people who feel that they want to start writing, but they don't quite know what to write about. You get tired of writing about yourself, and you can't always think of anything to say about other people. If you feel like that I think it's a good thing to turn to animals, specially if you're writing poetry. And, of course, if you've got any sense at all, you're writing poetry.

There was once an American poet who said that he thought that he could turn and live with animals. It's certainly very true that few of us could live without animals. They make an especial appeal to poets, for poets like to write about the mysterious and the beautiful and the strong, and what could be more mysterious, more beautiful or stronger than a tiger? Whenever I see one of these great cats

silently padding to and fro behind the bars of its cage in a circus or zoo or even on the films, I always get a tremendous thrill in spite of the fact that I must have seen hundreds. I never get used to the wonder of the tiger any more than I get used to the lion's roar. It isn't surprising that the tiger inspired one of the finest poems in the language. The author was William Blake. Here it is :

Tiger ! tiger ! burning bright
 In the forests of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry ?

In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes ?
 On what wings dare he aspire ?
 What the hand dare seize the fire ?

And what shoulder, and what art
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart ?
 And when thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand, and what dread feet ?

What the hammer ? What the chain ?
 In what furnace was thy brain ?
 What the anvil ! What dread grasp
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp ?

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When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see ?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee ?

Tiger ! tiger ! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry ?

I think you'll agree that this is a tremendous poem worthy of its tremendous subject.

Now how did Blake do it ? First, of course, there is the way he tackles his subject. He isn't content just to describe tigers. He goes back to their first creation, and he is struck with wonder at two miracles ; how God could give shape to such a fearful animal, and then how God dare give shape to such a fearful animal.

You will notice that the first and last verses are exactly the same except for a change of one word. The last lines of the first verse are :

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry ?

and the last lines of the last verse are :

What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry ?

The words "could" and "dare" keep on repeating all through the poem. They are the keynote to its pattern. We call this the underlying idea of the poem, the sense of wonder that the same hand that made the frightened lamb could frame and dared to frame the ferocious tiger.

Now have a look at the way Blake turns this idea of his into poetry. He selects the commonest form of verse length, four lines. He makes the first two lines rhyme together, and the last two—skies, eyes ; aspire, fire. He then chooses short emphatic words like "deeps", "dread" and "dare". The best poets always seem to use simple words. Then comes the arrangement of them, the rhythm that gives the poem its tunefulness or melody. Here it is : Tum-ti, tum-ti, tum-ti, tum—long-short, long-short, long-short, long. And that again is not very common. For a less heavy, less majestic poem he would probably have chosen ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum, ti-tum. You see the difference ?

It isn't, of course, always necessary to use rhyme at all, and you can vary your rhythm

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to suit your subject. Your object is to compose a melody, and there are more ways than one of doing that.

Here is another poet, D. H. Lawrence, describing a yellow mountain lion that had been shot by two Mexicans. He uses no rhyme at all, and yet his effect is quite as musical as Blake's. He varies the length of his lines—one line has only one word in it; another line has twenty-three words in it.

It is a mountain lion,
A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness.
Dead.
Lift up her face,
Her round, bright face, bright as frost.
Her round, fine-fashioned head, with two
dead ears :
And stripes in the brilliant frost of her face,
sharp, fine, dark rays.
Dark, keen, fine rays in the brilliant frost of
her face.
She will never leap up that way again, with
the yellow flash of a mountain lion's long
shoot !
And her bright-striped frost-face will never
watch any more out of the shadow of the
cave in the blood-orange rock,

Above the trees of the Lobo dark valley-mouth !

What a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain lion ! ¹

This time the idea in the poet's mind is to make us first see the noble beauty of the slim, yellow mountain lion and then to invite our pity for his death.

He gets his effect, as Blake does, by the use of very simple words of one syllable—like "round", "bright", "frost", "dead", "flash" and "gap", all easy words that everyone knows, and yet words that carry a clean-cut meaning. He adds to this effect by a grand comparison. He calls the mountain lion's face bright as frost, and having said this once repeats it with variations no less than five times. Here they are: "bright face, bright as frost", "the brilliant frost of her face", "the brilliant frost of her face", "bright-striped frost-face", and "missing white frost-face". He does it, of course, to

¹ From *Mountain Lion*, by D. H. Lawrence. By kind permission of Mrs. Frieda Lawrence and Messrs. William Heinemann.

imprint into our minds the outstanding feature of the lion, and the result is that we never think of a mountain lion again without thinking of its bright frost-face.

Never be afraid to repeat a good original phrase once you are certain that it is both good and original. I am not sure that I should follow Lawrence's example of having no rhyme, because you may find that you are not writing poetry at all, but only a rather inferior prose.

You have just seen how the sight of a shot mountain lion affected D. H. Lawrence. The cries of a rabbit caught in a snare inspired another poet, James Stephens, to write another pity-poem for the hunted. This time there is both rhyme and an obvious rhythm. Indeed, this poem is written in the most usual form of four lines to a verse with the first and third lines rhyming, and the second and fourth. But here once more there is repetition, and the repetition is of a very unusual and rather clever kind. The last line of every verse is also used as the first line of the succeeding verse. This makes the rhyming much more difficult. Listen :

I hear a sudden cry of pain !
 There is a rabbit in a snare : a tr
 Now I hear the cry again,
 But I cannot tell from where.

But I cannot tell from where
 He is calling for our aid : help
 Crying in the frighten'd air,
 Making everything afraid.

Making everything afraid,
 Wrinkling up his little face,
 As he cries again for aid ;
 And I cannot find the place !

And I cannot find the place
 Where his paw is in the snare.
 Little one ! Oh, little one !
 I am searching everywhere ! ¹

That is a very simple and very effective poem. It is easy enough to see what that poet is driving at. He hates the thought of rabbits being trapped, and so does anyone who has ever heard them cry in their traps. What I find very strange is that he couldn't trace the

¹ From *Collected Poems* by James Stephens. By kind permission of Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

cry to its source, because you and I, if we have ever let rabbits out of traps, must know that it is the easiest thing in the world to find them. It's a slightly irritating poem because if the poet can't find the rabbit, how does he know that he is wrinkling up his little face?

There is no need to depart from the ordinary laws of common sense in poetry. All the same, the poem is memorable. It is very simple, and it makes us shudder at the cruelty of man to the hunted, which was of course the poet's main object.

By the way, there is no need always to be so desperately serious as these poets are. Some animals inspire amusing poems. Dogs do. Listen to this one. Here's Rupert Brooke describing his little dog's day :

All his life he'd been good, as far as he could,

And the poor little beast had done all that he should.

But this morning he swore, by Odin and Thor,

And the Canine Valhalla—he'd stand it no more !

He fought with the he-dogs, and winked at
the she-dogs,

A thing that had never been *heard* of
before.

“For the stigma of gluttony I care not a
button,” he

Cried, and ate all he could swallow—and
more.

He took sinewy lumps from the shins of old
frumps,

And mangled the errand-boys—when he
could get ‘em.

He shammed furious rabies, and bit all the
babies,

And followed the cats up the trees and then
ate ‘em.¹

In this sort of poetry you naturally adopt a
jollier lilt,—ti-ti-tum, ti-ti-tum, ti-ti-tum, ti-ti-
tum, sort of thing,—a gallopy, racy rhythm.

Get rid of the idea that to write poetry you
must always be solemn as a churchwarden.
Certain animals are funny, and one of them
is the cow—or so Robert Louis Stevenson
thought. Listen :

¹ From *Little Dog's Day* by Rupert Brooke. By kind
permission of Messrs. Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd.

The friendly cow all red and white,
 I love with all my heart :
 She gives me cream with all her might,
 To eat with apple-tart.

It all depends upon the way you look at them. Suppose you were writing a poem about a fly. You'd probably want to write about it as a public nuisance, a carrier of germs. But there are other things about a fly that it takes a poet to see. Walter de la Mare tells us what the world looks like through the eyes of a fly.

How large unto the tiny fly
 Must little things appear—
 A rosebud like a feather-bed,
 Its prickle like a spear ;

A dewdrop like a looking-glass :
 A hair like golden wire :
 The smallest grain of mustard-seed
 As fierce as coals of fire :

A loaf of bread, a lofty hill :
 A wasp, a cruel leopard :
 And specks of salt as bright to see
 As lambkins to a shepherd.¹

¹ By kind permission of the author.

Now, there's a poet using his imagination. Why not try something on the same lines about what the world looks like through the eyes of a giraffe or a caterpillar?

Lord Tennyson gives us a grand picture of what it looks like through the eyes of an eagle. Listen :

He clasps the crag with crooked hands
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls ;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

That is rather an unusual way of writing poetry, because each of the two verses has three lines that all rhyme. Hands, lands, stands, and crawls, walls and falls. He gets his effect by selecting just one thing about the eagle—its crooked hands or claws. He says nothing of its feathers, beak or eyes. He concentrates solely on its clinging. What a splendid description that is of the sea seen from a great height as “wrinkled” and “crawling”. It never seems wrinkled or crawling when

you're on it, but seen from an aeroplane or mountain-top "wrinkled" is exactly what the sea is, "crawl" is exactly what the sea does.

To be a good poet you've got to see a little more clearly than anybody else. And you've got to like things rather more than other people do. In one of the best poems ever written in the world—*The Ancient Mariner*, the poem in which the sailor is cursed for shooting an albatross, Coleridge tells us that

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small.

He certainly makes the best poet who loveth best all things both great and small.

Think how beautifully certain poets have written about birds, Shelley on the skylark, Keats on the nightingale, Wordsworth on the cuckoo, W. H. Davies on the kingfisher, Swinburne on the swallow and Meredith on the white owl. There are probably quite good hate-poems about spiders and snakes, bats and earwigs and other creepy-crawly things. But the true poet concentrates on the animals or birds that he most loves, and he tries to see

them more clearly than anyone else, and he lets his imagination play round them, and then when he has got his idea he searches round for the most suitable lilt or rhythm and the rhyme scheme that best serves his purpose, and off he goes.

Probably you'll only get a line or two that will satisfy you to start with, but by keeping at it, and constantly rewriting and polishing, you may in the end achieve a true poem. Anyway, have a go—write a poem about your cat, your dog, a grasshopper, anything from the whale to the flea. There's plenty of choice. If I were a poet I should write a poem about ducks, for I never pass a duck-pond without wanting to stand for hours watching their absurd habit of standing with their heads at the bottom of the mud and their legs kicking wildly in the air.

Here is a great poem about ducks. It's called "Ducks' Ditty":

All along the backwater,
Through the rushes tall,
Ducks are a-dabbling,
Up tails all !

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Ducks' tails, drakes' tails,
Yellow feet a-quiver,
Yellow bills all out of sight,
Busy in the river !

Slushy green undergrowth
Where the roach swim—
Here we keep our larder,
Cool and full and dim.

Everyone for what he likes !
We like to be
Heads down, tails up,
Dabbling free !

High in the blue above
Swifts whirl and call—
We are down a-dabbling
Up tails all !¹

¹ From *The Wind in the Willows*. By kind permission of Mrs. Kenneth Grahame and Messrs. Methuen & Co., Ltd.

IX

NEWSPAPERS

HAVE you seen the paper to-day? What's the news? What's that you say? *Which* paper? Does it matter? Isn't the news the same in all the papers? You know jolly well it isn't. That's the funny thing about news. We read books for the story. We don't ask whether they're true or not. *The Wind in the Willows* isn't true; we read it because it's a grand story.

But we read newspapers for information. The one thing we want from a newspaper is the truth. And it isn't always easy to get. But before there were any newspapers it was very much harder. Here's an example. It's from Shakespeare's "Henry IV". The Earl of Northumberland is waiting for news of his son, Harry Hotspur, who is fighting against the King. First comes a messenger with the

news that Harry Hotspur has won a great victory. The Earl of Northumberland asks him how he knows all this, if he saw the battle himself. He has to confess that he only heard the news at second hand. All too soon comes another messenger fleeing from the battle-field, to contradict the rumour of victory, and tell the Earl that all is lost, and that his son, Harry Hotspur, is killed.

You never knew what to believe in those days, five hundred years ago. And even in this age of wireless and the telephone it isn't always easy to tell the difference between rumour and truth.

I can't in any war. One day I read that the Spanish Insurgents had claimed to have massacred 2,500 of the Reds. The Reds on the same day claimed to be celebrating a victory in that very same city.

In war-time particularly, each side only thinks of keeping up the spirits of its own troops, and the people at home, and so even if they have suffered a great defeat, they will try and make it sound like a victory.

So if you want to know how a war is going

on you must read the news, but you must also look to see where the news is coming from. You take some battle in history that you know very well, or imagine some battle, describe first what really happened, and then write what the newspapers on each side might have printed. That'll give you some idea of the way truth gets twisted up in news.

But news isn't only battles. Well—what is it? If a dog bites a man it is not news; why? Because it is so common. But if a man bites a dog it is news; why? Because it is uncommon.

One day a circus girl at Blackpool was bitten by a large seal. That was thought to be news by the *Daily Express* and the *News Chronicle*, but not by the *Daily Herald* or the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express* gave a picture of the girl riding a motor-bike with the seal as pillion rider. If the seal had just balanced a plate on its nose, it wouldn't have been news because all seals love balancing things on their noses, but they so seldom attack anybody or ride on the back of a bicycle that it is news when they do.

So news is something out of the ordinary, earthquakes, murders, battles, aeroplane and ship and train disasters, but not motor accidents because they're so common ; miners' strikes, royal weddings, but not everybody's weddings ; big football matches, but not little ones, and seals biting circus girls.

The business of the newspaper is to get this news in the proper order of importance. This is done in two ways. Obviously the biggest news, the most important news, must have the biggest space, and it must always be put in the same part of the paper, otherwise you wouldn't know where to look for it. In the *Daily Herald* it's on the first page. In the *Daily Telegraph* it's on the middle page on the right. In *The Times* it's on the middle page on the left. The B.B.C. haven't got any pages. Let's take the B.B.C. way of doing it. They begin by giving urgent messages about those who are wanted by the police or by ill relatives. Then comes the Weather Report, which is nearly always most important to a great number of people.

It is most important that ships should get

that weather report as early as possible. So the B.B.C. put their weather early because it's very important.

Different papers of course handle the news differently. The miners working in a coal pit in South Wales some time ago refused to come up again because men were being employed who didn't belong to their union. They actually stayed a mile underground for 178 hours. Here are the beginnings of two newspaper accounts of their arrival at the surface :

Sunday Graphic

White-faced under the coal grime, bearded, their eyes glazed, 184 miners emerged from the Nine Mile Point Colliery, in South Wales, yesterday. The "stay-in" hunger strike was over.

Here's the *Sunday Express* :

The 173 men who have since Saturday last entombed themselves in the three pits of Nine Mile Point Colliery here were led into the sunlight this afternoon.

You noticed that the first paper puts the number of miners as 184 and the second as 173. A third says that the number to stay

down for the whole week was seventy and that the other hundred joined them on Monday.

You may think it queer that a simple thing like figures are different in different papers, but you try reporting a football match and counting the number of people watching it. One says there were 273. Another says that there were only 94.

The newspaper has other things to do as well as telling the news. It gives its opinion about the news. And you must be very careful to notice the difference.

It was a fact or news that the South Wales miners might strike for higher wages. It was the opinion of the *Sunday Referee* that "South Wales miners are staking their lives against economic and social injustice in an appeal to the conscience of the Country".

Here is *The Times* on the same subject : "The coal-mining industry is not to-day in a position to concede the wage claim. . . . The miners of South Wales will be guilty of a grave breach of agreement if they strike."

You see the difference ? This is opinion, two opposite opinions, not news. The news

is what the miners did. These opinions look like news, but they're not news. The opinion is what the newspaper thinks of the miners, whether it sympathises or not.

Here is another example of the difference between news and opinion. One day some unemployment figures were published. These were tucked away in a corner of the *Daily Express* and *Morning Post*, but the *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald* made a splash of them, that is, they gave them big headlines :

“ 34,098 without a stroke of work for five years ” ; “ Army of the Hopeless ” ; “ 380,927 idle for over a year ” ;

The *News Chronicle* went on to give their opinion about this. Here it is :

Have you lain awake worrying over the rent, dragged tired legs about the streets in search of a job, watched a woman's face growing lined, and her children growing thin ? Then you know what worry means.

There are 380,927 folk in Britain who have been unemployed for a year or more, 34,098 condemned never to have brought home any wages on Friday for at least five years.

The other papers except the *Daily Herald* made no comment, because to them it was less important on that day than some other news.

Each side puts the truth as it sees it, but it sometimes sees it through smoked glasses. It's your job to see it clearly.

Next time you go to a football match, stand next to someone who is backing the other side, and then write two reports of the game —one, as you see it, and then as you think he saw it. If your side won, aren't you going to talk of the grand play of your team, and if your side lost, aren't you going to talk of their bad luck? Won't he do exactly the opposite and talk about the grand play of his side if they win and their bad luck if they lose? Both of you are describing truthfully what you see, but it's affected by your opinion.

You can't help having opinions of your own, and it is a very good thing that you should have them. If you haven't strong opinions it means that you don't care much about anything. But these opinions should be founded on knowledge. And I usually

find that when people hate this and that, they usually hate it through ignorance.

You read newspapers to cure this ignorance. But you've got to know how to read them, and you've got to read more than one. You read newspapers to find out what is happening in other countries—Russia, Germany, America, China, Spain.

In old days it didn't matter so much about other countries, but to-day when you can fly across the world in three days and talk across it in a fraction of a second, you've got to keep in touch, and the only way to do that is to follow the news.

I'm not suggesting that you should read a newspaper right through every day. I am suggesting that you should get into the habit of picking out the high spots, and trying to take an intelligent interest in the way your village and your country is governed.

To get the greatest fun out of life you ought to be curious about everything, and want to know all about the latest inventions, news of the latest explorations and flights, follow the careers of our leading men, whether

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they're artists or poets or scientists. News-papers let the great explorers and flying men tell their own story.

You study the history of the past in books, but you'll find the history of your own time in the newspapers.

X

SCHOOL MAGAZINES

YOU find newspapers rather dull and your school magazine terribly exciting, don't you? Why's that?

It's because you love seeing your own photograph and your own name in print. Everybody does. And even if your name doesn't appear the names of people you know and like, and know and dislike do. And when the news is about people you know it becomes ten times more interesting.

That's one great difference between a newspaper and a school magazine. One is about people and things that you don't know. And the other is about people and things that you know very well. One's all about the big world outside, which is all rather strange and dangerous and unexpected. The other's all about the small world of the school which you do

know. It isn't a bit strange, but very safe and friendly.

There's another big difference. The difference of time. The newspaper gives the news every day, but the magazine collects the news of the month or the term, or even the year.

But a school magazine is made up of more than news. It has articles, stories, poems, humour, criticism, letters, photographs and drawings, and a hundred other things as well as news. And you find it all very exciting. It is exciting to you because you are reading about yourselves and your friends. It is even more exciting to you because you are writing about yourselves. But I want you to make it much brighter, much more exciting, much more full of surprises than it is now. You find it exciting. I don't. I've seen thousands, and I find them nearly all terribly stodgy and solemn. Your editorials are the worst part of the lot. I find it very difficult to go on after page one because I don't like being addressed as if I were a public meeting.

An Editorial ought to button-hole you, and almost whisper in your ear, "I say, old chaps,

I've got a lot of rather jolly things in my lucky bag. What about having a dip inside and see what sort of a plum you can pull out?"

If it's not confidential like that, I think an Editorial ought to be a sort of showman shouting outside a circus.

"Oyez ! Oyez ! Oyez ! Step inside, ladies and gentlemen, and see all the seven wonders of the world. If you want to laugh your sides out or cry your eyes out here's your chance. Come inside."

The first and last business of a magazine is to keep all its readers interested. And to do that it has got to be full of surprises. You know those magazines that you finger lovingly on the bookstall. You pick one up and begin to turn the pages and a flimsy brown paper pattern of pyjamas, or swimming-costume or shorts falls out, and then postcards drop out promising you a free powder-puff or a free bottle of medicine, or if you buy some more of their stuff a jig-saw or a billiard table or a motor-car.

Well, you ought to have surprises of that

sort, rewards for the best snap-shots, and competitions for the most original cover design. A school magazine ought to have a fresh surprise in its cover every time to give you, who think you can draw, something to do. There ought to be lots of drawings and photographs and wood-cuts and lino-cuts and things of that sort.

There ought to be unexpected interviews, what the school caretaker thinks of you all, and the policeman who holds up the traffic for you to cross the road and the school cat and the chimney sweep. There should be a section on How to Make Things, illustrated with diagrams—model yachts and radio sets. There should be a whole page reserved for funny drawings, cartoons, caricatures, and humorous stories.

But be careful. It's much more difficult to be funny than it is to be serious. Nobody ever dreams of sneering at a writer "Oh ! He's trying to be serious ! " But nearly everybody sneers at the comic writer "Oh ! He's trying to be funny." Still, it's worth trying. You never know. If you can be as funny as

“ Beachcomber ” in the *Daily Express* you’ll do.

One morning Beachcomber quoted a news story from a newspaper and then added his own comment, and that’s the sort of comment I’d like to see in your comic page. Here it is :

An infuriated elephant chasing Colonel —, one of Kenya’s best-known settlers, round and round his farm was the sight that met the horrified eyes of native workers summoned to the scene by the elephant’s fierce trumpeting. (News item.)

“ Even though he is such a well-known settler,” said a native, “ this is no time for him to settle.”

“ What a trumpeter that beast would make for our native Boy Scouts,” sighed an old witch-doctor wistfully.

“ Listen ! ” cried the first native, “ he’s sounding the charge ! Poor little colonel ! And he told us, over and over again, that he won the three miles for Oxford in the University Sports of ’87.”

* * * *

Whenever there is space at the bottom of a page there should be a poem. This sort of thing :

The African Parrot

The parrot is a talking bird,
 He's coloured grey and white,
 He eats and talks and climbs all day,
 But goes to sleep at night.

He lives about three hundred years,
 His colours are always the same,
 He is full grown at two years old,
 And he's never been known to be lame.

That's good enough for any school magazine.
 Here's another sort of surprise. There ought
 to be songs that you have actually made up
 and sung yourselves. With the music.

You see what I mean. You've first of all
 got to aim at brightness. You must entertain
 your readers, give them an appetite for the
 more serious stuff that's coming. The main
 body or backbone of the magazine is of course
 the report of what has been happening since
 the last number of the magazine, that's the
 school history.

You always watch football matches. Well
 now, do more than watch. Keep a note-book,
 and jot down things about it while the game
 is going on—not only the actual score, but the

condition of the ground, the state of the weather, the number of people watching and their behaviour, anything and everything that happens. As soon as you get home write your account and see if you can make it as good as this. It's from the report of a cricket match.

The fast bowler thrust out his chin and prepared to bowl. In a quarter of an hour he had terrified seven batsmen, clean bowled six of them, and broken a stump. Eleven runs, six wickets, last man two.

You see : bright, accurate, and no words wasted. The length of your report is very important. Write it first at the length that comes most natural to you. Then begin to cut, and cut, taking out everything which does not carry the story a step forward. The Editor wants so many words and only so many, so remember the space you've got to fill, and don't try and stuff a lion into a dog kennel.

This reporting isn't to be confined to games. You can report an account of your visit to a Chemical Works, of your camping holiday, of a walk or a bicycle ride, of what is happening

in your class, of any play that the school acts, of what you see on Guy Fawkes night, or Election night, of the activities of the School Natural History Society or Camera Club.

You can also report on things of outside and wider interest, new advances in television, for example, new forms of street lighting, new types of railway engines and motor-buses, new types of houses and flats that are being put up round your school, the way your suburb, town or village is developing.

So much for news. And after news, as on a newspaper, comes opinion, criticism, which many people find much easier, what you think of what you see and hear. There's always someone who wants to complain or voice a grievance, and the magazine can be a good outlet for a grievance.

There's nothing in the world, unless it's the smell of a carnation, or the colour of a sunset that couldn't be bettered, but make sure that the means to better it are available before you start to criticise.

You can voice your criticism in the form of a letter to the Editor :

SIR,

Every Tuesday afternoon as soon as Mr. Mais begins to talk to us on the radio an organ-grinder strikes up outside our classroom window.

Now I like organ-grinders, and I don't like Mr. Mais. Wouldn't it be jollier if we had a rest from the wireless at this time and learnt something about music which we all enjoy.

Your obedient servant,
JOHN BEETHOVEN.

But criticism can be of two kinds. There is critical praise as well as blame.

Criticism is your opinion, and when you are watching something and you want to clap, or reading something and you say "Jolly good," well, that's the beginning of true criticism. Get into the habit of criticising everything.

When you go to a film it's difficult to take notes while you're watching as it's in the dark, unless you have an illuminated pencil, but as soon as you get home write out the plot of the story. That's the reporting. Then describe and criticise the acting, the scenery and the photography. Suggest things that might have been done to improve it, and make quite

clear why you think it's good or bad. Don't be afraid to praise ; don't be afraid to blame ; but have good substantial reasons for both.

It isn't enough to say :

Fred Astaire was grand. James Cagney was grand.

You've got to think out why you thought them grand. This sort of thing :

Fred Astaire's feet are more expressive than most actresses' faces.

Cagney is tough, but he's a natural tough, and he interprets the sort of American to the life who brings out a gun quickly.

If you're criticising your local railway-station don't just say "It's ugly." You've got to find reasons. Talk about its inconvenience, and draw plans for a more convenient one. You see what I'm aiming at. It is good that you should criticise your new desks, your new classroom and the pictures on the wall, but you must know what it is you like or dislike about them.

Not "I think the new classroom is lovely." But "I like our new classroom because there

are more windows that I can see out of, and I like seeing the rooks in the trees by the church which I have never noticed before." Or "I do not like the blue walls of the classroom because they make me feel cold."

Not "The new desks are uncomfortable." But "If the new desks were tilted up a little more and the backs tilted back a little less it would be easier to write at them. But perhaps they were made for us to listen. In that case there should be one desk for listening and one for writing. I submit plans."

But whether you're reporting, giving your opinion or writing a short story you must, like a good cook, cultivate a light touch. You want everyone to devour what you write, not leave it about untasted.

Too many of your school magazines are as tough as old mutton or as hard as boards.

A school magazine isn't a board. It isn't even an honours' board, though it is in a sense a roll of honour. Well—make it sweet and light as a Swiss Roll. What it should do is to communicate, very subtly, the spirit of the school. It ought to show the reader

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whether you are really interested in tens of thousands of outside things, whether you have the courage of your opinions, whether you are intelligent and imaginative ; or whether you are like peas in a pod, all cut to one pattern, and not troubling to be your own best self, bright, breezy, full of laughter, and not afraid of being laughed at for bringing out new ideas.

Your school magazine ought to be an outlet of high spirits, and a safety-valve for new ideas, as well as a history of your own schooldays. Try to make it so.

XI

IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS

ONCE upon a time a boy and a girl were travelling together in a train. They didn't know one another very well. The girl started tapping with her finger-nails on the carriage window. The boy thought he ought to be polite and say something. It seemed rude to take no notice of her. So he asked her if she'd been to the pictures lately.

“No. I hate pictures.”

He tried again. Looking out of the window he said :

“They’re some jolly decent walks out there, don’t you think?”

“I hate walking.”

“I suppose you spend all your time playing games, tennis and hockey and things.”

“I hate games.”

He tried one last shot.

"Have you read any good books lately?"

"I hate reading."

There didn't seem any more to say. She seemed all hates. There was a long silence. Suddenly the girl burst out.

"I love talking."

Are you like that girl? I know lots of people who are. Everybody loves talking, but very few people have anything to talk about. They just jabber. Everybody loves talking, but very few people know how to talk. I'll give you a sample of the sort of stuff that you and I usually say.

I meet Maggie in the village street any day of the week. I say: "Oh! Hello, Maggie. How-do-you-do?"

MAGGIE. How-do-you-do, Mr. Mais? It's a nice day, isn't it?

ME. Yes. It *is* a nice day, isn't it? Quite a change.

MAGGIE. We can do with it.

ME. We certainly can.

(Long pause.)

ME. How are *you* keeping?

MAGGIE. Oh, nicely, thanks. How's yourself?

ME. Nicely, thanks, and your mother, how's she this morning?

MAGGIE. Getting on nicely, thanks. And how's *your* mother?

ME. Getting on nicely, thanks.

(*Another long pause.*)

ME. And George, how's George getting on in his new job?

MAGGIE. Getting on nicely, thanks.

ME (*unable to think of anything else*). Well, I must be getting along.

MAGGIE. So must I. I can't stand about all day talking. I've got work to do. It's been nice seeing you.

ME. It's been nice seeing you. Good-bye, Maggie.

MAGGIE. Good-bye, Mr. Mais.

Well—that's pretty dull, isn't it, but even that isn't half so dull as most ordinary conversations. They're worse than dull, they're depressing, all about rain and rheumatism.

There are people who are jolly good talkers. I was listening to the wireless the other day

in Children's Hour when Stephen King-Hall started talking about the funny things some of us carry in our pockets. I always like listening to him, because he has got something to say, but I don't always agree with him. He makes me want to argue with him. Good talkers do. And as usual, I wanted to answer back. When he said that he was surprised at the number of things that you and I bulge our pockets out with, marbles, bits of string, pocket-knives, cigarette cards, chalks, tadpoles, keys, dirty handkerchiefs, old bags of sweets, bits of stick, conkers, and so on I wanted to begin an imaginary conversation with him and shoot out then and there :

“Yes, it’s all jolly fine for you. You have a big desk and drawers to put things in. I have to carry all my possessions on me like a snail.”

Then he might have replied : “Even a snail can be tidy. Why not turn your pockets out oftener, and throw away what you don’t want, that rusty nail, for instance, and those small stones. And why not make yourself a small wooden box or scrounge a biscuit

tin for your treasures? You can't want to carry all that stuff about everywhere you go."

I should have said : "Yes, I do want to carry it about with me. I never know when I may want that stone to throw at something. Somebody might want to swap these conkers for a stamp, and I'm always using that nail to dig things with, and if I put my string in a box, I know jolly well somebody'd pinch it. No, thanks, I'll keep my things where I can get at them always. Besides, I like being able to turn them over in my pocket. They make me feel rich, even if I do scratch myself sometimes on the old nail, and find my conkers and pencils all covered with bits of gum and toffee."

And he'd say : "I'd rather have my pencils sharp and clean." And so it would have gone on. But as he was talking into the microphone I couldn't answer back, so I could only have an imaginary conversation with him. But I like imaginary conversations. I'm always having them.

We bump into a stranger in the street

with our head down, and he says : "Who do you think you're bumping into ? "

We usually just say "Sorry, sir," and hurry off, but if he's bad tempered and tries to clip us over the ear we wish afterwards that we had thought of something better than "Sorry" and so we hold an imaginary conversation with him in which he says :

"Who do you think you're bumping into ?" and quick as lightning we flash back, "An escaped convict. Am I right, Mister ? "

But we don't usually think of a retort until it's too late, usually in our dreams the following night. And it's not much use running back to say what you have to say. A retort to be successful must be like a bullet fired off at the right moment in the right direction.

If you want to have a retort ready you've got to practise in private, just as you've got to practise in private if you want to become a good writer. And listen to other people talking. When their talk strikes you as being good take it down. It doesn't matter what they're talking about, cabbages and kings,

walruses and carpenters and sealing-wax. But whatever it's about it's got to be bright, brief and quick. And write it down. Keep a piece of paper and pencil or note-book and pen (I prefer note-book and a pen any day). *I* prefer note-book and pen. *You* prefer a piece of paper and pencil. Why? I lose bits of paper. I break pencils. Pencil-writing smudges. Note-books keep what I've written tidy. So listen, listen to every sort of conversation, and when you think it's good enough write it down.

I'll tell you why. I've already told you that your own conversation wants improving. But there's another reason. You want to write, don't you, books, stories, all sorts of things?

Well, when you begin to write a story you find that you can describe the house or town or village where it's happening without much trouble.

You find that you can describe the characters, what they wear, how old they are and all that. Then comes a stop. Your villain is a miser, suppose. It isn't enough to say

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so. You've got to make him behave like a miser, be grasping and mean to everybody.

And you'll find that you've got to bring out his miserliness in his conversation.

All the people in your story have to show what sort of characters they have by what they say, their loveliness as well as their hatefulness.

And I think this is far the hardest part of writing. People always betray their characters by what they say.

Appearances are nothing. Speech is everything. Don't you believe that?

Well—here are some tests for you. Get your pencils ready. I'll give you a fragment of the conversations of a few people and you write and tell me what you think their characters are like. Are you ready? I'll call them A, B, C, and so on. Here's A. Listen:

"Yes," I said to her, "Mrs. Wilkins, I sez. As sure's I'm standing here I sez. Right to her face, I sez, Mrs. Wilkins, I sez. Yes, just like that, I sez, and you should just have seen her face. I sez, you dare to do a thing like that again, Mrs. Wilkins, I sez, and she

sez to me, she sez, Mrs. Harris she sez I never, she sez, and I sez Mrs. Wilkins, yes, I sez, you sez *you never*, I sez——”

Well, what's the character of A?

Here's B. Are you ready?

“ Oh ! Isn't he lovely ? Isn't he divine ? Oh ! the little teeny-weeny popsy-wopsy. Come to Mummy, ickle precious.”

What's the character of B?

Here's C :

“ Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry. Don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry, set up straight. Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry. Why don't you try to behave ? ”

It ought not to be hard to draw a picture of C.

And here's D :

“ Call this a cup o' tea, Miss ? I ask yer, where's the milk ? 'Ot water poured out of the coal-'ole I call it. And this bun. What sort o' teeth d'ye think I've got ? You may well call it a rock cake. It wants dynamite, not 'uman teeth, to make a 'ole in this.”

So you see how important the talking part

of a book or story is. The whole success of it lies in the way you report the conversation.

So you must practise that on all occasions. And that's where these imaginary conversations come in. And, anyway, it helps you to test people's characters. Quite apart from writing about them we all want to know what people are really like.

A little time ago I heard a man on the wireless in the series "Men Talking" conducting one of these one-sided conversations. He just talked. He talked about his dislike of bowler hats and the noise of pneumatic drills, and of the tons of food he had eaten and years he had slept. And it was quite easy to see what kind of a man he was.

You try drafting out what you would say if the B.B.C. asked you to give a twenty-minute talk on "A boy talking"—"A girl talking". And having had a go at single-handed conversations try your hand at two-sided talks—dialogue.

Imagine the conversation between a giant and a dwarf on eating too much, between an only child and the youngest of seven on

brothers and sisters. Imagine a conversation between a negro and an Eskimo on the advantages and disadvantages of living at the Equator and the North Pole, between a mother and daughter on the subject of having hair permanently waved, between a boy who wants to go to sea and his father who wants him to go into an office, between a tramp and a millionaire on walking in the rain, and between a person charged with driving too fast and a person charged with loitering, after they've both been convicted and fined.

The best way to learn how to write good conversation is to listen to the dialogue of actors on the stage or on the screen. You'll find there that nobody says more than eight or ten words without somebody butting in for his eight or ten words. Conversation or dialogue is like a shuttlecock. It must continually go to and fro and not stay on one side. It's got to be natural, the way people do talk and not bookish, stilted, or full of long words. Try to invent conversation between historical characters. What was it like breakfasting with Henry VIII? Kings at

breakfast must be as human as anybody else. Let's suppose we're looking on while Henry VIII is having breakfast with his sixth wife Katherine Parr. He's already breakfasted with Katherine of Aragon, Anne Bullen, Jane Seymour, Katherine Howard and Anne of Cleves, that is, two Kates, two Annes and a Jane. Here's his third Kate.

KING. My egg's raw. It really is too bad.

KATHERINE. Yesterday you complained of their being hard.

KING. And so they were. I don't want a hard egg and I don't want a raw egg. I want them to be cooked just right.

KATHERINE. You are very difficult to please. The egg was in boiling water for three minutes and a half. I boiled it myself. But give it me. I like them like that. I will boil you another.

KING. No, it's too late now. But it is a fact that you have no idea how to boil an egg. I wish you'd let them do them in the kitchen.

KATHERINE. If they're done in the kitchen you complain because they're not here when you come down, and if they are here, you say they're cold.

KING. I never say anything of the kind. The cook boils eggs beautifully.

KATHERINE. She shall boil them to-morrow.

KING. One would have thought that a woman of your experience might at least know how to boil an egg. I hate a watery egg. (*Pensively.*) Poor dear Katie used to boil eggs beautifully.

KATHERINE. Do you mean Katherine Howard or Katherine of Aragon?

KING. I was alluding to poor, dear, misguided Katie Howard. Katherine of Aragon never *was* my wife. The marriage was not valid.

KATHERINE. Well, Katherine Howard ought to have known how to boil eggs, considering her mother was a kitchen-maid.

KING. That is utterly untrue. Her mother was a Rockford.

KATHERINE. You're thinking of Anne Bullen.

KING. Yes, yes, to be sure, Katie's mother was a Somerset.

KATHERINE. You're thinking of Jane Seymour.

KING. Not at all. Jane Seymour was a sister of Somerset's.

KATHERINE. All I know is that Katherine Howard's mother was a kitchen-maid. And I think it's very unkind of you to throw her up at me. I suppose you mean that you

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wish she were alive, and that you loved her better than you love me.

KING. I never said anything of the kind. All I said was that she knew how to boil eggs.

I didn't invent this imaginary conversation. It's by Maurice Baring.¹

In imagination you can bring together the most unlikely people from all ages.

Imagine a conversation between Francis Drake and Queen Elizabeth on suddenly being shown a film in which they both appear.

Imagine a conversation between Julius Cæsar and Shakespeare listening to a wireless performance of Shakespeare's play "Julius Cæsar".

There's grand scope for your invention there.

¹ By kind permission of the author.

XII

FILMS—ANIMAL CARTOONS

YOU like going to films? Of course you do.

You'd be a pretty queer sort of person if you didn't. They're warm, they're comfortable, they're exciting, they're funny. It's lovely not only to be able to hear the news but to see the news happening. It's grand after having read a book to see it come to life before your eyes on the screen. It's tremendously exciting to see big-game hunters taking photographs of actual lions and tigers and other ferocious beasts in the jungle.

But there's another way of dealing with animals on the screen. Do you remember I said that it wasn't always necessary to be desperately serious about animals in poetry? Well, it isn't always necessary to be desperately serious about animals on the films. And by

far the most original thing that the cinema has yet produced is a lot of funny animals. Everybody knows them, everybody laughs at them, and everybody loves them. They are easily the most popular feature of the films to-day. You know their names as well as I do. Even if you've never been to a cinema you know Mickey Mouse, Minnie, Pluto, Donald Duck and the rest.

Now, what is there so very funny in Mickey Mouse, and why does everybody like the *Silly Symphony*? What does he do on the pictures that can't be done as well in a book or on an ordinary stage? For Walt Disney, the inventor of Mickey Mouse, didn't invent the idea of animals behaving strangely. Animals were doing very strange things in books long before Walt Disney came along. There was Mr. Toad disguised as a washerwoman, whom we meet in *The Wind in the Willows*, and there's the March Hare and the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

The advantage that Walt Disney has over the people who write books about animals is that he can actually make us see them do the things,

and he can make them do more mad things, and more mad things faster than you could ever get on the stage in an ordinary play.

And a sure way of getting people to laugh is to show animals like human beings or human beings rather like animals, or better still, animals behaving in the most absurd way and changing like lightning from one absurdity to another, tortoises using their heads as piston-rods and rhinos using their tusks to cut trees into planks for Noah's Ark.

Walt Disney didn't start with Mickey. He had five years on "Alice in Cartoonland", found that nobody liked it, and had to start again. Already most of the ordinary animals had been used by other cartoonists—dogs, cats, rabbits, and so on. And suddenly he remembered a mouse that used to run about his old office when he was working late at night, and he began to work out a rough scenario or plot for this mouse and called it Mortimer, but that was thought rather too grand a name, so he rechristened him Mickey. And now all the world knows Mickey Mouse.

He's not really like any mouse that you and

I ever saw. Let's have a good look at him close up. When I think of Mickey quickly I think of two black ears that aren't really pointed as an ordinary mouse's ears are at all, but quite round like two black full moons. Then he has the thinnest of legs, and arms as thin as his legs. He has human hands and feet, but they are caricatures, exaggerated, like the huge hands and clodhopping feet of a policeman. He has the silliest black blob on the top of his nose and a completely white face. But the thing that matters most about Mickey is the way he rolls his eyes. No—it's his voice, his shrill, piping, treble voice. He is bold and adventurous and talkative.

Indeed, he is about as far removed from our ordinary idea of a mouse as he could be. He's completely human. That doesn't matter at all. He's alive and he's grand fun, and so are his companions, his sweetheart, Minnie, the long-nosed, long-bodied dog Pluto who is always getting into trouble, and Claribelle the cow and the horse who are so much alike that I can't tell them apart except for Claribelle's horns. The funniest of all is Donald Duck the

gate-crasher, who is terribly like all the ducks I ever knew and yet is also like a lot of human beings I know, always quacking about the place, interrupting and pushing himself forward and quacking with anger when he finds that he's not being appreciated. He first appeared in "The Orphan's Benefit", when he would try to recite "Little Boy Blue" to an audience of very unappreciative Mickies, who kept on giving him the bird. He couldn't really recite at all, and he kept on breaking out into loud furious quacks of indignation, and tilting his silly hat and rolling his eyes this way and that, because his audience weren't listening, and threw bricks at him. An angry duck is always a laughable sight. Then a very majestic, fat prima donna hen comes on and sings one of those soprano solos full of trills that some audiences appreciate so much, and we laugh and laugh at the resemblance of the hen's clucks to some opera singers that we have heard. I like "The Orphan's Benefit" because Donald Duck and the soprano hen sound and look so exactly like all the bad singers I've actually heard on the stage.

You see what tremendous advantages the film has over the stage or a book in the "Band Concert". You get absolutely perfect playing of the instruments because, of course, they can go on taking and retaking the sound until they have got it perfect, and once having got it, it is recorded and distributed all over the world, so that it is just as good in Huddersfield as it is in Paris or New York, or Timbuctoo.

Well, in the "Band Concert" we get our first laugh watching Mickey as the conductor of an orchestra of animals playing "William Tell". It is beautifully played, and we like that. Then we start to chuckle because Mickey's conductor's hat keeps on jerking over his face, and his much too long sleeves keep on falling over his wrist whenever he brings his stick down. But the real comic business starts when Donald Duck, dressed as a sailor with his perky sailor's hat cocked over one ear, comes along and first interrupts and then joins in with a piccolo. A piccolo is a small flute played sideways. I don't know why it should make people laugh, but it does. And jolly well he plays too, but Mickey rushes

at him, takes away his piccolo and breaks it in half. That doesn't disturb Donald Duck. As soon as the band has started again, he mysteriously produces another piccolo like a conjuror producing a rabbit out of an empty hat, and once more he joins in. When Donald Duck begins playing his piccolo the band takes up his tune and plays that until Mickey stops them and they start again.

Again Mickey rushes at him and breaks the piccolo and this goes on until they play music imitating a storm, which is so good that it brings up a real storm which carries the whole orchestra up into the air, but they still go on playing as they are being whirled about, and the last we see of Donald Duck is all twisted up in the trunks of three trees that have got all intertwined like the coils of a girl's plaited hair.

I liked the "Band Concert" because of the music, because I can see each instrument playing its part, because of the unexpectedness of everything, and because of Donald Duck's piccolo playing which is as good as it is funny.

But the two silly symphonies that I like best are "Father Noah's Ark", and "The Hare and the Tortoise".

In "Father Noah's Ark" you get a grand example of the film's advantages over every other form of entertainment. First, every known animal in all creation can be drawn and made to move quickly across the screen as if actually alive. The trouble is that they move so fast that you can't really take in what they are all doing. Noah uses them to help him in building the Ark, so that you get snakes acting as the caterpillars of the tractors, wood-peckers pecking out the holes for the rivets, and tortoises banging the rivets in with their heads. You get the grand idea of a rhinoceros being used to cut up the trunks of trees into planks. The rhino is in a cage, somebody waves a red rag in front of him to make him excited, he's released, and he charges along with his head down end-on at the trunk of a tree ; his one horn acts as a saw and rips the tree up into planks, and he goes on doing that, backwards and forwards, and long before you're ready, the Ark is built and you see the

long procession up the gangway of insects, birds, every living thing in pairs. Near the end comes the elephant who sticks in the door and the penguins dash in under his feet, and the mule obstinately refuses to go in, until he is given a flying kick as if from a catapult which lands him with such force on the elephant that it drives the elephant in and the doors shut behind him. Then we see the inside of the Ark during the forty days' rain and storm, and all the animals being hurled from side to side of the great cabin, feeling very sick. We listen to Noah singing a negro spiritual as if he were Paul Robeson for the rain to stop, and when it does stop and the sun shines, there is a grand jazz hymn of thankfulness.

The colours of this film are lovely, and it is very funny, but it moves so fast that I have to see it half a dozen times before I can take it all in. That is perhaps why I like the coloured symphony called "The Hare and the Tortoise" better. It doesn't move quite so fast, and it's simpler in its plot, so I can grasp all of it at once. I can remember very nearly everything about it. Everybody knows

the story of how the hare and the tortoise agreed to have a race and how the hare threw the race away by being too cocksure. But the way that Walt Disney treats it shows us how poor our own imaginations are. I used to think of an ordinary hare loping along in the rather ungainly way that hares move when they are not hurrying, and the tortoise going steadily, rather dully on. But Walt Disney's hare and tortoise run like human beings on two legs, upright, in fact they are two people that you and I know very well. The Hare is dressed like an athlete, tall, slender, conceited, terribly full of his own tremendous reputation as a runner, smiling in a thoroughly irritating, superior way through his two silly hare's teeth.

He puts us off right at the start by condescending to poor old Tortoise and twice pretending to shake him by the hand and then like lightning taking it away before Tortoise sees that it isn't there any longer.

Tortoise is bald, has a neck that he can suddenly make long or short as he likes, wears an absurd sort of night-cap, and smiles very amiably, very absurdly, and rather vacantly

at everyone. A jolly good fellow, you feel, but no earthly good at anything. We love him from the start almost as much as we dislike the conceited hare.

The start of the race is first-rate. The tortoise is so stupid that he faces the wrong way. The hare, very well pleased with himself, takes off his blazer, shakes hands with himself in that silly way that self-satisfied boxers do and settles down on his mark like an Olympic champion. And when the pistol is fired, the hare goes so fast that all the leaves fall off the hedges as he passes by. I think that's a tremendously funny idea. Then he decides to stop and have a look back. But he's going so fast that he has to make his feet act as brakes along the ground, and it's exactly like watching one of those frightfully fast racing-cars pull up unexpectedly, all brakes, and tyres shrieking. And that's a screamingly funny idea to think of a hare's pads as a motor's brakes. The tortoise is so far behind that the hare settles down under a tree for a snooze, and gradually the tortoise comes pounding along, his neck jerking to and fro, looking for

all the world like a very fat farmer puffing and blowing as he chases small boys out of his fields. The hare wakes up, does another lightning streak so fast that you can see nothing except the whirl of leaves that he leaves behind, and then stops to listen to his praises being sung by four young schoolgirl rabbits sitting on a wall. He decides that he has plenty of time to show them what he can really do, so he goes inside the school grounds, takes up a bow and arrow, shoots an arrow, races after it, overtakes it, puts an apple on his head and waits for the arrow to come along and split it. Then he takes a ball, bowls it, dashes after it, overtakes it, hits it with a bat and leaps after it and catches it as it comes down. His final trick is to serve a tennis ball, leap the net, take his own service, return it, leap back again, and take it, and so have a very fine game of tennis entirely by himself.

Now that is a very funny thing to watch, (i) because nobody has ever thought of it before, and (ii) because of its absurdity, and (iii) because it is so good-humoured. And it's a grand way of illustrating the ter-

rific speed of the hare. Suddenly he realises that the tortoise is very near the winning-post, and we get an exciting series of shots of the poor old tortoise rolling on towards the winning-post, cheered on by all the other animals, and the hare making one last prodigious arrow-like dash to overtake him. And just as they come neck and neck to the tape Tortoise suddenly shoots out his neck, and to everybody's delight wins. What I like best about this is the way Disney turns the tortoise into such a thoroughly charming person. Disney is not only a great lover of animals himself, he makes us love them. In fact, he likes them so much that he hates to give them an unhappy ending. He gives the old stories of the "Grasshopper and the Ants" and the "Three Little Pigs" quite different endings from the old ones because he would hate the grasshopper and the two naughty pigs not to be happy.

I put Walt Disney very high in the list of film artists. He has brought into our lives something quite new. He makes us laugh, he puts us in a good temper, and nearly all his characters are kindly natured animals.

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I like his colours, I like his ideas, I like the brilliant way he makes the music fit the story, I like the way his animals are just like animals and yet just like people at the same time.

He has added a lot to the world's gaiety. The man who can make all the world laugh like that deserves all the success he gets. I call him a jolly good fellow.

XIII

FILMS—NEWS-REELS

SOME papers, the picture-papers, give more space to photographs of the news than to reports of the news. And as it is easier to take things in by the eye than the ear, picture-papers are very popular. And as it is easier to take in things by eye than ear the films give news too.

The film-editors call it bringing the news-papers to life. A news-film is usually called a news-reel.

Now what do you do when the news-reel comes along? Go to sleep, or sit up and take notice?

If you sit up and take notice, you'll begin to see why they give news that you don't expect, and don't give news that you do expect. Let's have a look at some of the news-reels that I've seen lately.

One thing I saw was someone in wig and gown standing on the steps of the Royal Exchange in London, reading out the Royal Proclamation for the Dissolving of Parliament. What he was reading was of no interest, and worst of all the cameraman's shots, by shots I mean pictures, of the crowd showed that they were not interested.

Now why was this shown? It was shown for safety's sake. Really exciting things cannot be shown on the screen. I mean terrifying things. We can read about a railway accident at Welwyn, a tornado in Japan, or an earthquake at Quetta without turning a hair, but if we were shown these things actually happening on the cinema we should not be able to stand it.

It might make our blood curdle.

So the film-editor is barred from giving us the most thrilling news, and in its place chooses a safe subject which cannot terrify us—and as a result too often he only bores us. This reading of a Proclamation was unimpressive and dull.

We were next shown the procession through

the streets of Belfast of the funeral of Lord Carson. And here again a great mistake was made. What do you know of Lord Carson? I knew that he was a great man in Northern Ireland, in Ulster, or he wouldn't have been given such a big funeral. But I didn't know enough to be interested. I wanted to know much more and there was the chance.

I think funerals are horrible to watch. Lord Carson's death was a great opportunity to show us shots of Lord Carson's life, and instead of so much funeral there should have been shots of Carson leading his Ulstermen, and of the results of his fight to make Ulster the place it is to-day. It's no good showing us the present without some reference to the past.

That's why I'm so glad to see that the American news-reel called "The March of Time" has come over to England.

This is much more ambitious than our news-reels. Let's take an instance. You've heard of Huey Long, the American Senator of Louisiana, who was assassinated some time ago. Our news-reel would probably show his

funeral. "The March of Time" would give us his whole life ; show him as a boy earning his first money, fighting his way to fame as a lawyer, his election to the Senate, show him speaking, show some of the changes that he brought about in Louisiana, the new roads, and perhaps take a prophetic shot into the future and show what Louisiana will be like without him.

"The March of Time" would take a subject like Unemployment, give photographs of the ordinary daily life of the unemployed family, then give photographs of its causes and of its remedies. And the running commentary would be pretty searching criticism.

This kind of news would make us see much more clearly than we do at present, how nations are heading, what Germany is doing, and what famous people are famous for.

"The March of Time" uses news-reel shots, studio reconstructions of the past, that means a bit of acting in the studio, music, recorded speech and a wise commentary or opinion on what it shows.

At present we just get a short shot of a funeral

procession, Lord Carson for instance, and wonder what he did in life. We see a man on the steps of the Royal Exchange reading out a Royal Proclamation and wonder why it should be done that way. "The March of Time" would have told us.

The next thing I saw was a view of the All Blacks playing Rugby football against some Welsh side, Cardiff, I think, and it was so cleverly taken that instead of seeing scraps of a line-out here and a scrum there I saw the whole of one grand movement from the time the ball left the scrum. I saw it passed from the halves to the three-quarters, and I saw one of the three-quarters dash right through the Welsh defence and just scramble over the line as he was tackled. It was such magnificent photography that I felt as if I were in the stand really watching the game. That's the right way to do a news-reel—give a complete picture of one movement. My objection to it was that it was too short. Just one grand run and it was over. But not everybody wants a lot of football, and the news-reel Editor has to cram into ten minutes all

the news he can use ; and he has got to please all sorts, people who don't like football as well as those who do. But, however short, he ought to make each piece of news complete.

That's why I liked this so much.

You see, an enormous lot depends on the skill of the cameraman, not only in placing his camera at the best angle to get the best results from a game, but if you've seen and heard political speakers you'll know what I mean, in posing and producing speakers.

I saw one politician reading his speech. That made his speech sound dull.

The cameraman could easily have made it look as if he was not reading. Another was posed stiff and upright and made to look as if he were glaring at us and most uncomfortable instead of being made to look as if he were enjoying himself. And then suddenly we were shown a jolly good bit of posing. The speaker sat at his desk with papers all over the place and leaned forward and chatted to us as if we were in the room with him. That was the right way of taking him. As well as taking what you see, and taking it

from the best angle, you must use your imagination and do some follow-up work.

In one news-reel I saw the *Mauretania* being broken up, a very sad sight, and all the cameraman did was to point the camera at the boat. We weren't told what happens to her anchor or other scrap iron. Nor were we reminded of her glorious past. Here surely was an opportunity to show us her launching and setting out from Southampton on the high seas in a gale, and arriving in New York, as well as the probable fate of each part. We ought to have seen all over her at the height of her triumph—people dancing and dining—and then quick as lightning we should be brought back to the picture of her poor broken decks. Film news should be past, present and future. But this is, of course, more the job of the news-editor than the cameraman.

I recently had a talk with the Editor of the Gaumont-British News-Reel and he told me some of the difficulties of the job.

"There's the weight of the camera and the sound equipment. That's 112 pounds," he said. "Once you've got it fixed you can't

easily move it. And if you've made a mistake and can't see after all, you can't just move somewhere else. And if you take a bad shot you can't—well—you can't exactly ask the Queen to launch the *Queen Mary* twice in an afternoon."

"I know you've got to be careful," I said, "not to hurt people's feelings by showing them too horrible things, but don't you think you give too many dull subjects?"

"Such as?" he asked.

"Laying foundation-stones, opening bazaars and inspections."

He laughed. "My dear man, everybody loves inspections. Everybody has some relative in the army and thinks that he's seeing him march past. There's the music of the band, and the precision and smartness of the drill. Without the Army, Navy and Air Force we should be in a bad way for news that'll film. They're all picturesque."

I agreed with him about the Navy. Nothing excites me more than the sight of a battleship or whole channel squadron churning their way through a rough sea. I asked him what was his best piece of work lately.

"A horse race," he said. "The Lincolnshire is run over a straight course with a road running parallel and we had a man on a car that kept just in front of the horses the whole way through the race. It was a lovely bit of work. But speed's our main job, keeping the aeroplane in readiness to bring the film back to Heston, the fast cars at Heston to bring it to the studios, and the quick developing and printing and making the commentary fit in with the picture."

I nodded my head. I've tried making a running commentary on a film myself and I know just how difficult it is to synchronise the commentary on the sound track.

All right. Suppose you were the Editor of a news-reel, which subjects would you choose? Would you give a shot of the circus girl in Blackpool who was bitten by a seal? If not, why not? Would you give a shot of the miners who stayed down the mine for a week, and if so, what line would you take? Would you give shots of the miners' meeting of protest, the miners saying good-bye to their families, the life they lived underground with

rats all over the place, their reunion when the strike was over, and the effect of their strike? What else would you give? You'd obviously do Guy Fawkes. Yes, but how? You don't want the same old stuff every year. You might give shots of the original Guy Fawkes' plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament; you might give shots of firework shows at the Crystal Palace in the old days, and a picture of a set piece to-day. You'd give shots of squibs and catherine-wheels and rockets of all sorts bursting. You'd give a whole succession of guys and people passing them in the street, and you'd give processions with the music of the bands. But you've to keep your audience interested. So you've got to change quickly from long shots to close-ups, from the distance to within a few inches. You ought to get an aerial view looking down on a black earth as full of pinpricks of bonfires as the sky is of stars on a moonless night and then one of the faces of the crowd round the bonfire as the flames flicker up and show their various expressions.

The most interesting thing you'll get will

be the different sorts of looks on the faces of the crowd, eager, tired, rough, gentle, smiling, angry, well-dressed, badly-dressed, pretty, ugly, young, old, saints, sinners, contented and discontented.

Use your spectators. But pick out the interesting spectators.

Suppose you're outside a Town Hall, waiting for election results to be announced. Switch your camera quickly like a search-light on the crowd when the results are given and see how supporters of the winner take the result and how supporters of the loser take it.

Earlier in the day you'll have taken shots of the voters passing through the polling booth, and shots of the men counting the votes. Now you'll take quick close-ups of candidates puffed up with victory or bowed down with defeat, congratulating and sympathising. But don't forget that it's the crowd that makes the story.

Have a shot of old-time elections when things were pretty rough and there was a lot of stone-throwing, and a shot of the election of 1950 as you imagine it will be.

Remember, past, present and future. And above all keep your eye open for beauty.

One of the best things I've seen lately was a lovely bit of colour film showing us the lakes and mountains of Southern Ireland, with jaunting-cars on the roads, and labourers working in the fields, just a bit of every-day life in a setting of great beauty.

One of the worst mistakes that newspapers used to make was to give us only photographs of ugly things, wrecked cars, people being carried off to hospital, and fat people making speeches at banquets.

Now they've woken up to the fact that we prefer beauty to ugliness, and so most days in most papers you'll see a big photograph of men ploughing a field of stubble, horses hauling timber from the woods, or hounds racing across a field.

Always be on the look-out for beauty in your news, and get shots of windjammers under full sail coming up the Channel, sea-gulls flying over the trawlers as they come into harbour, aeroplanes and fast trains at full speed.

If you want to enjoy films in the same

active way that you enjoy reading you must keep your mind alive to what's wrong and what's right about them.

So next time you go to news-reels don't just lie back and go to sleep, but think how you would handle the subjects they show if you were the cameraman or the editor of the news-reel.

If I were editor of a news-reel I know what I should do for a start. I should film the day of the coal-miner, the shepherd's day, the fisherman's day, the engine-driver's day, the cook's day, the actor's day, your day, my day, everybody's day. That's what I call a news-reel. It ought to be easy.

Now—what would you film?

XIV

FILMS—“HISTORICAL FILMS”

LET'S suppose a big film company have told us to make an historical film for them. How should we set about it?

I should first make a list of those men and women in history about whom I knew and cared most—the people I'd *like* to film: who would you put down? I'd put down Joan of Arc and Julius Cæsar, Lady Jane Grey, the Duke of Marlborough, Catherine the Great, Francis Drake, Clive of India, and so on. Alfred the Great, Shakespeare . . .

But I couldn't make films of all these. Which would be the best person to take? Well, it would be silly to take Catherine the Great; she was Empress of Russia, and not very many English and American people are interested in her. Anyhow, there have been two films about her quite lately—one with

Elizabeth Bergner, and the other with Marlene Dietrich.

It would be silly to take Alfred the Great or Shakespeare, I think, because really we know hardly anything about them as people. We know a few of the things they did, but we've no records of anything they actually said, and we probably shouldn't be able to invent things for them to say that would sound good enough for Alfred the Great or Shakespeare.

You remember the “Imaginary Conversations” in Chapter XI? Well, it was easy to imitate a woman like Mrs. Gamp—“I sez to 'er, I sez. ‘Mrs. Harris,’ I sez . . .”, but it is not at all easy to write an imaginary conversation for Alfred the Great or Shakespeare. You may be able to make it very funny, or very serious and heavy, but nobody except you will think it's anything like Alfred the Great or Shakespeare.

If you tried to make a film of Joan of Arc, you might be able to get Bernard Shaw to lend you his play about her, and you could use some of that dialogue. You see Bernard

Shaw is a great writer, but there are only one or two great writers alive, and you might not be able to get one to help you with your film. So it would be a good idea to choose a person for your film like *Lady Jane Grey* or *Francis Drake*. Then you'd have diaries and letters to work with, and reports of actual conversations and speeches. Without being a genius you could make *Jane Grey* or *Francis Drake* talk very much as they might have done.

I should then go to the films to see how other people have made historical films. This would teach me what the possibilities of the camera are. I should be reminded for one thing that I could easily take my historical character all over the world, show him going round it if necessary and fighting battles by land or sea, which is more than I could do realistically on a stage.

The films give me a fine chance to let myself go in the matter of grand processions and elaborate dressing. But processions and dresses can be very dull. In one film I saw of *Catherine the Great* they seemed to spend

the whole time getting out of one sort of uniform into another and having more and more processions. What I wanted to see was what sort of person Catherine was, and all I was shown was how she dressed. What I wanted to see was what happened to her, and all I was shown was her strutting up and down in fresh dresses and uniforms.

A film's terribly dull unless you are really shown what sort of a person the hero or heroine is—what their temper's like, whether they like dogs, whether they're shy in company, what their ambition is, what they like, and what they dislike. And things must happen, and the things that happen must make the hero or heroine feel or think something. A film may be full of earthquakes and battles, but I get very tired if the hero or heroine just marches through it all as if it were nothing.

When I'd seen several historical films, I'd think again about Lady Jane Grey or Francis Drake. I should select incidents in their lives that seemed to me specially suitable for films.

What about Lady Jane Grey?

Well—first, what do you know about Lady Jane?

The thing to do is to collect all the information we can and see what part of it best fits the screen.

You know that at the age of sixteen she was Queen of England for nine days and that before she was seventeen she had to see her husband taken off to be executed on Tower Hill, an hour before her own execution. There's plenty of chance there for a grand tragic picture.

But we must go back a bit.

Perhaps we'd start by showing her at twelve years old.

Have you read Harrison Ainsworth's book *The Tower of London*? If you have you'll know quite a lot about Lady Jane Grey. You'll remember how strictly she was brought up by her parents. She herself tells us :

When I am in presence either of father or mother, whether I speak, keep silence, sit, stand, or go, eat, drink, be merry or sad, be sewing, playing, dancing, or doing anything else, I must do it, perfectly as God

made the world, or else I am so sharply taunted, so cruelly threatened, with pinches, nips and bobs that I think myself in Hell. Whatsoever I do else but learning is full of grief, trouble, fear and whole misliking unto me.

But learning and her gentle teacher she loved so much that she could speak and write in seven languages, and was a fine musician and needlewoman.

Well, you can easily see what a chance that gives us to show what she was like at twelve ; bullied by her parents, and loving learning to get away from them. Then we might show this book-loving, dress-loving, lovely, modest child in the household of Lord Seymour who tried to marry her off to the young King Edward VI, who was her cousin.

But Seymour you remember was beheaded for treason.

We might then show her being taken up by the Duke of Northumberland and married when she was only fifteen years old to his son Lord Guilford Dudley, and within a month or six weeks of the marriage the King was dead, and we could show Lady Jane being

implored to accept the crown by her ambitious husband.

She didn't want to be Queen and the people didn't want her either, but she gave way and accepted the crown. We could show the boy who cried out for Queen Mary when Jane was being proclaimed Queen. We could show Northumberland's army setting out to fight against Mary, and deserting. We could show the proclamations of Mary as Queen and Jane relinquishing most willingly the crown she never wanted.

We could show her standing her trial for treason and we could show her in prison in the Tower hoping for liberty.

And she might have been allowed to go free if Sir Thomas Wyatt hadn't rebelled and so made it unsafe for Mary to let her stay alive.

So we could show the grand climax of the tragedy ; Lady Jane watching the terrible procession of her boy husband being taken off to execution on Tower Hill only an hour before her turn came. And then when she was preparing herself for death she saw the

ghost of her husband just before she laid her head on the block.

Now, we could show all those things. But do we want to? Wouldn't it take too long, anyhow? If it was Lady Jane you were most interested in, you'd have to concentrate on her, and just ignore all the battles and so on in which she herself wasn't involved.

It is a very sad story, and you may say that you don't want to tackle a sad story. But it's a very good story, a very human and dramatic story.

But you may say that you want a more cheerful story, something with more action.

All right—what about Sir Francis Drake? What do we know about him? We know that he was the first man ever to have sailed round the world. And there's a grand chance for the film. Ships and the sea always look good on the screen, especially Tudor ships with their great sails and complicated rigging.

But we've got to find out what happened on that voyage. You'll find it in Hakluyt's voyages. We would of course show the start of those five ships from Plymouth in 1577. Then

there was that mutiny on the part of his best friend Thomas Doughty who was executed on the same spot where Magellan had left one of his mutineers on a gibbet sixty years before. There was Doughty's last request after he had been condemned to death that he should be allowed to dine and take his last Sacrament in the company only of the leader and friend whom he had betrayed. There's a grand dramatic scene in the friends' last meal together.

Then there was Drake's magnificent sermon to his mutinous crews as soon as he had put Doughty to death. You've got to remember that film-making isn't all photography.

These Tudor sailors spoke a grand English. Listen to this sermon of Drake and ask yourself whether you think this would sound well on your film.

My masters, we are very far from our country and friends : we are compass'd in on every side with our enemies : wherefore we are not to make small reckoning of a man, for we cannot have a man if we would give for him £10,000. Wherefore we must have these mutinies and discontents that are

grown among us redressed, for by the life of God, it doth even take my wits from me to think of it. Here is such controversy between the sailors and the gentlemen, and such stomaching between the gentlemen and sailors that it doth even make me mad to hear it. But, my Masters, I must have it cease ; for I must have the gentleman to haul and draw with the mariner and the mariner with the gentleman. Let us show ourselves to be all of a company. I would know him that would refuse to set his hand to a rope. I know there isn't any such here.

If there be any here willing to return home, let me understand of them and here is the *Marigold*, a ship that I can very well spare : I will furnish her to such as will return, but let them take heed that they go homeward, for if I find them in my way I will surely sink them, for by my troth. I must needs be plain with you. I have taken that in hand that I know not in the world how to go through withal. It hath even bereaved me of my wits to think on it.

Now there's a fine situation. A grand simple sailor's speech, and every bit as good as that of Mark Anthony over the body of Cæsar to the Roman mob. And you can make just as

much of it as you like. Unless you're very stupid you won't keep the camera on Drake's face all the time he's making it. You'll run it quickly over the upturned faces of the discontented crew and show it gradually taking its effect and changing them from an uneasy mob ready to rush at the Admiral and kill him, into a united band of loyal seamen ready to follow him to the world's end. If you produce that scene well you'll fill your cinema for months. Then we'd show Drake taking all the provisions from two of the ships and turning them adrift. We'd show the separation from the other two ships who missed him at the rendezvous and had to return to England. We'd show Drake going on alone in the *Golden Hind*, seizing every Spanish ship he could lay his hands on and attacking the Spaniards on shore until the ship wouldn't hold any more loot. We'd show him trying unsuccessfully to find the North West Passage from the Pacific into the Atlantic. We'd show the *Golden Hind* struck on a rock and getting off again. We'd show him returning home with reduced rations, a

crew of fifty-seven men in rags, and only three casks of water to last them over a month. And we'd show him sailing into Plymouth Harbour on that September morning two years and ten months after he set out, with most of his friends taking it for granted that he was drowned. Yes. If I was producing a film of Sir Francis Drake I should make a lot of that first voyage round the world. I'd get shots of all the places he touched at.

But let's go back a bit. I should begin my picture by showing Drake as a boy learning his seamanship from Sir John Hawkins. I'd show him as captain of the *Judith* at twenty-two years old fighting under Sir John Hawkins at San Juan in the Gulf of Mexico and losing all the money he had put into the venture. I'd show him recovering his losses by sacking the Spanish town of Nombre de Dios. I'd show him and his men penetrating the jungle of Panama and climbing a tree to get his first view of that Pacific Ocean which he was afterwards to conquer. I'd show him using the Maroon negro slaves to help him track down and fight the Spaniards. I'd show him

at the court of Queen Elizabeth telling her stories of Spanish treasures, arousing her interest and getting her to provide him with the means to undertake his voyage round the world.

Having shown that voyage I'd bring him to Deptford and show the Queen knighting him for his exploit on board the *Golden Hind* to the great indignation of the Spaniards who regarded him as a pirate. And particularly would I show him sailing off to Lisbon with a fleet of thirty ships and singeing the King of Spain's beard by burning over 10,000 tons of ships in the bay of Cadiz. And of course we'd have the previous game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe when Drake said that there was plenty of time to finish the game and beat the Spaniards too.

We'd have the approach of the Armada, the strategy by which the smaller English fleet out-maneuvred them and there'd be a chance of following the fortunes of one or two of the great Spanish galleons, particularly the flagship of Don Pedro de Valdez which struck Drake at once on hearing his dreaded name.

We'd see the storm driving the mighty Armada on the rocks. And we could finish our film either with Drake at the height of his fame announcing his victory and the defeat of the Armada to the proud Elizabeth, or we could show him dying on his own ship off Nombre de Dios, the scene of his first great triumph at the age of fifty.

Now what have we left out that people will want?

Can you think of anything?

Well—there's been a film of Francis Drake and you have probably seen it. But in it they have introduced a love element which we've forgotten.

They show a girl called Elizabeth Sydenham being bullied by her parents into marrying Doughty's brother who is in league with Spain. But Elizabeth isn't having any. She loves Francis Drake, and manages to marry him without anybody getting to know anything about it just before he sets off round the world.

Well, a little romantic touch like this doesn't hurt so long as we don't let it take up too much time.

But let's look more closely at some of the things that stand out in the film. I liked the opening of the picture with all the fuss and excitement of seeing young Drake off on his early voyage, the people running about on the quay, the mothers and wives worrying and biting their lips, the youngsters envious, everybody cheering and waving. I liked the quick changes, now looking down on the quay from the rigging, and looking up to the ship from the shore. Most of all I liked the sound of the creaking as they hoisted sail.

Then I liked very much the quiet of the Sunday in Plymouth broken by the children singing as they danced past, the scene in church when the children upset the sermon by whispering that Drake was back, so that everybody, including the parson, scampered out to give the sailor his welcome home. I liked the scenes at court with Queen Elizabeth in her very rich dresses (and goodness how fond of jewels and dresses she was), getting angry with the too cautious Lord Burghley who was always afraid of offending Spain listening excited to Drake's plans for despoiling Spain.

I liked immensely Queen Elizabeth's spirited speech to her troops :

Let Tyrants fear : I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. I know I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman : but I have the heart of a King, and of a King of England too : and think scorn that Panama or Spain or any Prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realms.

That speech got a cheer when I was last in the cinema and well it deserved to. And it taught me that it is better to use the words that these heroes and heroines of history actually used than to invent a dialogue which probably would not sound fitting.

One of your main businesses is to make your film look and sound right.

Someone will always detect a fake and it's never worth while. I hated the fake ships in the film.

We have come a long way from the simple fun of writing diaries and letters, but if you want to write at all you must keep up with

THE FUN OF WRITING

the public demand, and what people want to-day are better newspapers, better newsreels, and better films.

So here's your chance. You'll probably get your fun best in trying your hand at the latest inventions, so in your writing don't forget that the whole world will rush to applaud your work if you can write a good film.

There's plenty of good material lying about waiting for you to turn it into a good film. I'm still waiting for someone to write the film of *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Wind in the Willows* and *Kidnapped*. Why don't you? There's fun and a fortune in any one of them.

